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SANTA CRUZ

**THE GIANT WOMAN AT THE END OF THE WORLD:
JAPAN'S POST-POSTWAR SUBLIME MELANCHOLIA IN POPULAR
MEDIA**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FILM & DIGITAL MEDIA
with an emphasis in COMPUTATIONAL MEDIA

by

Yasheng She

June 2024

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

The Giant Woman at The End of The World: Japan's Post-Postwar Sublime

Melancholia in Popular Media

Yasheng She

Our imaginations of calamity inform our attitude toward precarity. How does visual culture respond to traumatic cultural moments and shape our complicated feelings toward those moments? What are the ethics of living in an unstable world? These questions are more relevant today as we navigate a post-pandemic world marred by global conflicts.

I argue that public memories of turbulent historical events give culturally recognizable texture to (post)apocalyptic imaginations, making them allegorical. In turn, the (post)apocalyptic setting becomes a productive site for working through precarious social realities. Additionally, these imaginations traffic in gender metaphors, which sustain patriarchal configurations of power and control and, as a result, limit our ability to picture a future without dominance or mastery.

I believe a closer look at Japanese visual culture allows us to ruminate on the ethics of living in a precarious world. This dissertation closely examines Japanese animated films, television series (broadly as anime), and video games produced between the 1990s and 2010s. The 1990s saw the end of the Cold World and the start of the *Heisei* period (1989 – 2019). The bursting of the asset price shattered the myth of Japan's

miraculous economy and a sense of security slowly built up since WWII. In this period, Japanese popular media engage with this new modern precarity. What stands at the center of these texts is a giant woman who overwhelms the beholder's senses with her large scale and immense power.

I identify a “perpetually apocalyptic” setting within the objects examined in this dissertation. A perpetually apocalyptic setting pictures an eerily mundane world sandwiched between a catastrophic past trauma and an apocalyptic future calamity. Inhabitants of a perpetually apocalyptic world reference past events to prepare for the inevitable disaster. A perpetually apocalyptic setting recognizes existence as precarious.

This dissertation demonstrates different mediums’ strategies for facilitating cultural reflections by challenging the neutral façade. I use the giant woman as a cipher for Japan in the 1990s through the sublime as an aesthetic condition, a political apparatus, and a psychoanalytic framework. My intervention challenges the universality and apolitical façade of imaginations of precarity, apocalypse, and civilization.

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to talk about death, but we also cannot stop talking about it. Besides its inevitability, human culture has no consensus on the representation and interpretation of death. We are terrified and fascinated by what causes it, what might stop it, and what is beyond it. The simultaneous emergence of fascination and aversion toward death is also the basic principle of the sublime.

The sublime also has no unifying definition but generally gestures toward a state where all conventional understandings cease to exist in the face of imminent existential threat. The irrepresentable frightful allure sparks meditation on the human condition. One space for such meditation is (post)apocalyptic fiction, which often reflects upon social realities. One of my primary arguments is that public memories of turbulent historical events give culturally recognizable texture to (post)apocalyptic imaginations, making them allegorical. In turn, the (post)apocalyptic setting becomes a productive site for working through precarious social realities. I identify a “perpetually apocalyptic” setting within several popular Japanese media objects across different mediums that emerged in the 1990s.

This dissertation closely examines Japanese animated films, television series (broadly as anime), and video games produced between the 1990s and 2010s. These media address a sense of social precarity and contribute significantly to the Japanese visual culture. The globalization of Japanese visual culture urges me to contextualize these objects by reading them against their cultural and political milieu. These popular texts

enact unique visual and narrative strategies to ruminate on Japanese social realities while appealing to a global audience. I argue that some of these strategies transcend medium specificity, which enables me to take a transmedia approach. My reasons for choosing objects across different mediums are twofold: the first considers the characteristics of the “media mix,” whereas the second offers interventions to each medium. The media mix refers to “the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises.”¹ For instance, a popular manga (Japanese comics) can be adapted into an animated series, or anime, followed by video game, live-action, and theatre adaptations.

The media mix equalizes the significance of different adaptations, accentuating an intellectual property's cultural impact. Henry Jenkins uses “convergence culture” to describe this phenomenon and highlights Mimi Ito’s theory on the media mix to demonstrate *The Matrix*’s transmedia storytelling.² Marc Steinberg’s examination of the media mix sheds light on the domestic development of anime and “the global travel of anime and its associated media forms—manga, video games, figurines, cards, and increasingly, novels and live-action films.”³ My dissertation builds on Steinberg’s theorization by considering how the media mix impacts an intellectual property’s political preoccupation, especially on the global stage.

¹ Marc Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), viii.

² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814743683>, 112.

³ Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix.*, viii.

To appeal to a global audience is to be selective about representations, which often renders socially/culturally/politically specific context neutral. This dissertation demonstrates different mediums' strategies for facilitating cultural reflections by challenging the neutral façade. To achieve this objective, I focus on the cultural context of Japan's "lost era" and make my arguments through the lens of gender. An animated film is visually different from a video game with realistically rendered characters. Yet, the two can elicit similar emotional responses by tapping into preexisting representations and imaginations of crises. As a result, it is crucial to understand how culture and gender configure imaginations of precarity rooted in real-life political and social conditions.

I challenge the apolitical façade of popular culture through cultural and gender studies. Though film and television have been studied as forces of political mobilization, there is an ongoing struggle for video game companies and players to acknowledge video games as vehicles of political ideologies.⁴ Soraya Murray observes that visual and critical cultural studies are intimately associated with the studies of games.⁵ Murray brings Stuart Hall's description of culture to game studies and frames video games as a site of social engineering and political influence.⁶ My

⁴ Colin Campbell, "Why Are Game Companies so Afraid of the Politics in Their Games?," *Polygon* (blog), June 20, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/6/20/17480666/video-games-companies-lying-politics>.

⁵ Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, International Library of Visual Culture 27 (London: IBTauris & CoLtd, 2018), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

analysis builds on the visual and cultural lens urged by Murray and explores how the act of play sustains, enhances, and even undermines video games' narrative and ideological statements. Finally, my insistence on gender as a primary category of analysis sheds light on the perpetually apocalyptic setting's patriarchal configurations.

A perpetually apocalyptic setting often pictures an eerily mundane world sandwiched between a catastrophic past trauma and an apocalyptic future calamity. Inhabitants of a perpetually apocalyptic world reference past events to prepare for the inevitable disaster. The symbolic symmetry between the perpetually apocalyptic setting and discourse around Japan's historical trauma and future precarity allows me to frame the works I examine in my dissertation as allegories of Japan's "lost era." The perpetually apocalyptic setting shares similarities with *sekai-kei* fiction, in which a young man saves the world and romances a supernatural woman, and ideologically resonates with postmodernism. Alan Wolfe posits that postmodernism in the Japanese context does not consider the chance of survival but "how to survive in what has always been recognized as a precarious existence."⁷ A perpetually apocalyptic setting, likewise, recognizes existence as precarious.

Much scholarly and popular attention is paid to Japan in the 1990s. The 1990s marks the end of the Cold World and the start of the *Heisei* period (1989 – 2019). Japan's

⁷ Alan Wolfe, "Suicide and the Japanese Postmodern: A Postnarrative Paradigm?," in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H D Harootunian (United States: Duke University Press, 1989), 216–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12103bc.14>, 230.

asset price burst in 1991 shattered the myth of Japan's miraculous economy and, along with it, a sense of security slowly built up since the Second World War. Moreover, the 1990s have been regarded as the “lost decade” (*ushinawareta jūnen*). The continued stagnation of demographic and economic growth and myriad concerns over man-made and natural disasters later defined the Heisei period as the lost era (*ushinawareta jidai*). Anne Allison pinpoints this period as the start of Japan's modern precarity in her book *Precarious Japan*.⁸ She argues that the stagnation of Japan's postwar “miraculous” economic recovery and the government's failure to address several social issues reminded the Japanese people of the similar precarity Japan faced postwar.⁹ Allison defines the temporality of this modern precarity as “post-postwar.”¹⁰

This era also sees the exponential rise of manga (Japanese comics), anime (Japanese animated films and television programs), and video games. For instance, the animated series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995 – 1996) and the video game *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), which I examine in chapters 2 and 3, have become seminal texts that shaped Japanese and global visual culture. These two are perpetually apocalyptic fiction that mirrors post-postwar Japan's precarious social reality, most evidently through its allegories of nuclear power.

⁸ Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan*, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

Nuclear allegories are, of course, not unique to texts produced in the 1990s. The term *hibakusha* (bomb-affected person) emerged after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and came to describe texts that reflect upon nuclearity. Mick Broderick argues that *hibakusha* cinema connects the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with shadows of the Cold War and global conflicts.¹¹ The lingering effect of Cold War is still present in Japan as North Korea has reportedly fired missiles near Japan since the 2000s. Broderick's edited collection was published in 1996, and its contributors discussed media objects ranging from the occupation of Japan by the United States (1945 – 1952) to the end of the Cold War. One contributor, Donald Richie, notes that though the approach to visualizing the nuclear holocaust is varied, only a few Japanese directors, such as Tadashi Imai, would directly address the atomic bomb.¹² Other contributors to the collection, such as Chon A. Noriega, Ben Crawford, and Freda Freiberg, focus on nuclear monsters, Godzilla in particular, which further bolsters Richie's observation that *hibakusha* cinema favors nuclear allegories over direct utterance of nuclearity. *Hibakusha* cinema preserves the *hibakusha* generation's lived experience, which continues to impact future conversations about nuclearity, modernity, and precarity. The authors examined in this dissertation are not *hibakusha*

¹¹ Mick Broderick, "Introduction," in *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*, ed. Mick Broderick, Japanese Studies (London; Kegan Paul International, 1996), 1–19, 2.

¹² Donald Richie, "'Mono No Aware': Hiroshima in Film," in *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*, ed. Mick Broderick, Japanese Studies (London; Kegan Paul International, 1996), 20–37, 27.

because they did not live through the war. Still, their imaginations of the apocalypse are informed by *hibakusha* cinema, most noticeable in the design of the monsters.

Monster Theory

While postwar Japan recovered from the material devastation of WWII, the psychic wound of atomic bombings bled persistently, pouring forth extraordinary fictional creatures that reflect, resist, and recontextualize the sublime quality of nuclear power. Of course, not all monsters are nuclear allegories. They are attempts to capture the irrepresentable horror of the war and the unknowable future. The fearful object changes according to specific historical moments but always points to an unavoidable encounter with the sublime, something so powerfully overwhelming that it can shatter reality. However, it is difficult to identify the 1990s as a unique turning point in Japan's modern history because it is challenging to declare whether it marks a new era or is simply the zenith of the growing discontent that took hold during the tail end of WWII.

Instead of articulating the uniqueness of Japan in the 1990s, I focus on the monsters, born in this era, as ciphers of Japanese modernity. To do so, I invoke "Monster Theory," inaugurated by Jefferey Jerome Cohen, as a theoretic framework to decode the monsters in Japanese visual culture. Monsters as cultural objects resist classification by design. Their ambivalent status encourages new discourse to emerge

from traditions of cultural studies that favor cohesive conclusions. Cohen provides seven theses toward “understanding cultures through the monsters they bear.”¹³

“Thesis I: The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body” shows a path forward to understanding Japan in the 1990s by looking at the monsters in visual culture. Cohen write:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.¹⁴

Cohen’s statement underscores the monster’s potency as a cipher for culture.

Monsters do not make definitive statements about cultural moments but embrace people’s coexisting and contradicting feelings toward those moments. Monster

Theory synergistically resonates with the theory of the sublime because the monster’s body is an attempt to capture the irrepresentable.

Rhetoric of the sublime sets the foundation for my dissertation. However, I do not intend to prioritize the sublime as the theoretical umbrella of my analyses of post-war Japanese media. Instead, the sublime is an access point into the constellation

¹³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

of theories guiding my analyses. Through the sublime, I hope to provide a framework to illustrate perpetually apocalyptic texts as allegories of precarious social realities.

The Sublime as an Access Point

Developed within literature, philosophy, and visual culture, the sublime describes experiences in which conventional understanding ceases.¹⁵ Philip Shaw links sublimity to the moment when one's ability to "apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated."¹⁶ This defeat allows the mind to experience what lies beyond thought and language. Early conceptions of the sublime, namely the Romantic sublime, attribute what lies beyond our understanding to the vastness of nature or the authority of the divine.¹⁷ To face the sublime is, thus, to welcome a "transcendental" opportunity – a prominent belief held by Romantic literary giants, such as Longinus, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Burke.¹⁸

It is vital to state that because the sublime is developed primarily within Western literature and visual culture, it is more useful to understand it as a process and visual language, while considering its implicit Western roots, when applying to non-Western media objects.

¹⁵ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Second edition., The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

The sublime's visual potency is not a unique Western quality. The legacies of the Second World War also prompt postmodern considerations of the sublime, often concerning images of ruins and suffering. The ideology of the sublime fluctuates as each writer offers distinctive articulations of the irrepresentable. Given the scope of my dissertation, I primarily focus on the dichotomy between the Romantic sublime and the postmodern sublime. This pairing illustrates two relationships between the self and the other. The Romantic sublime treats the other as an opportunity for self-betterment whereas the postmodern sublime retains the other as it is so that the self can bear witness to it.

As an artistic expression, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) is one of the most cited paintings associated with the sublime and Romanticism. Widely believed to be a self-portrait, the painting captures the sublime as the subject stands triumphantly over the sea of fog (figure 0.1).



Figure 0.1. Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818).

Wanderer contains essential elements that are telling markers of the Romantic sublime. The masculine-coded subject revels in his transcendence as he stands on the peak of a mountain and over the edge of the foggy abyss. The excessive mountain peaks in the distance and the endless roaming fog emphasize the subject's singularity. His cane and one leg forward confirm his steadiness in the face of the vast unknown, yet the frame suggests there is still more that he has yet to, and might never, conquer. The overwhelming environment, the limitlessness suggested by the borders, and the excessive details illustrate the ironic pleasurable fear of the sublime, or, as Shaw puts it, "a promise of transcendence leading to the edge of an abyss."¹⁹ The beholder experiences the sublime vicariously via the subject in the painting, whose transcendental revelation in the face of imminent threat is frozen in paint. The sublime, therefore, is the most potent when it is temporary and is recognized by the spectator who finds it allegorical.

The aesthetic effectiveness of *Wanderer* is easily locatable in Japanese visual culture. A cursory glance at the cover art of recent popular Japanese video games reveals the legacy of *Wanderer*, such as that of *Elden Ring* (2022), *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), and *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018) (figure 0.2).

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.



Figure 0.2. (left to right) Cover art of *Elden Ring* (2022), *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), and *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018).²⁰

Tellingly, the cover art of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* reads like a direct reference to *Wanderer* as the beholder is presented with the back of the protagonist, Link, who stands steady in the face of the unknown. Furthermore, *Shadow of the Colossus* features a protagonist with the name of “Wander.” These games allow players to explore massive landscapes and enjoy intricate but creative encounters with threatening monsters. Though each game’s relationship to the landscape and the monster differs, they provide players with a sense of accomplishment as they overcome larger-than-life threats. In other words, explicitly or implicitly, these games echo the Romantic sublime as an aesthetic tradition and a transcendental process.

²⁰ *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018) is a remake of the original game developed by Team Ico in 2005. The original cover art shares similar visual language of the 2018 version.

The postmodern sublime, on the other hand, articulates a different relationship with the irrepresentable. Shaw uses postmodern theorist Jean François Lyotard to differentiate the postmodern sublime from its Romantic counterpart. Shaw argues that the Romantic sublime aims to incorporate the sublime other, whereas the postmodern sublime “seeks to retain a sense of the sublime as other.”²¹ Instead of overcoming the irrepresentable, the postmodern sublime does not aim to use the other as an opportunity for self-improvement but to bear witness to its otherness.

However, the Romantic-versus-postmodern categorization cannot cleanly divide the numerous conceptualizations of the sublime. For instance, Michael J. Shapiro describes his “political sublime” as post-Kantian without clearly stating it is postmodern.²² Shapiro borrows Lyotard’s terms to describe Haruki Murakami’s work as examples of the political sublime because they create “an altered (often oppositional) community of sense.”²³ On the one hand, despite Shapiro’s reworking of Romanticism and alignment with postmodernism, it would be reductive to categorize the political sublime under the banner of postmodernism. On the other hand, the Romantic-versus-postmodern dichotomy effectively differentiates two relationships with the other: one seeks to incorporate the other in the process of transcendence, whereas the other coexists and bears witness to it.

²¹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 12.

²² Michael J. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime*, Thought in the Act (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 40.

Structurally, the Romantic sublime and the postmodern sublime are similar. Take the promotional art of the video game *Death Stranding* (2019), which I further analyze in Chapter 4, as an example (figure 0.3).



Figure 0.3. Thumbnail art for *Death Stranding*'s Launch Trailer in 2019. The image shows the protagonist facing the ocean and five humanoid creatures.

The image shows the protagonist facing the ocean and five humanoid creatures floating above it. In the game, the ocean represents the afterlife, and the five figures represent extinction events. *Death Stranding* tells a story about struggling against calamity and isolation while denouncing individual excellence. Unlike the *Wanderer*, this image promises no transcendence but makes space for reflection and mourning. While structurally resonating with the Romantic sublime, this image aligns closer with the postmodern interpretation of the other, in which one bears witness to death's irrepresentable and inevitable nature.

Of course, it is not just wars and disasters that are irrepresentable. For instance, technological advances transform complicated processes into magical black boxes that can do what we want without knowing how it is done. The seeming unknowability of complex systems and structures makes contemporary technology challenging and ineffable to describe. David Nye utilizes the sublime to trace discussions around technological achievements in American history. He identifies the “technological sublime” concerning railroads and skyscrapers and the “electric sublime” exhibited by communication technologies.²⁴ Vincent Mosco extends Nye’s ideas further by examining cyberspace, such as the internet, and proposes a digital sublime.²⁵ Indeed, death and technology often intersect, and no object is more sublime than the nuclear bomb. Frances Ferguson lingers on the power of nuclear explosions and argues that the nuclear sublime operates similarly to other versions of the sublime.²⁶ However, Rob Wilson argues that the nuclear sublime is postmodern by asking, “Can the nuclear sublime still afford this same leisurely empowerment of selfhood?”²⁷

Like many psychoanalytic theories, the sublime concerns the dynamic between the self and the other. Besides the Romantic-versus-postmodern dichotomy, there are

²⁴ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), xv.

²⁵ Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 24.

²⁶ Frances Ferguson, “The Nuclear Sublime,” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 4–10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464754>, 9.

²⁷ Rob Wilson, “Towards the Nuclear Sublime: Representations of Technological Vastness in Postmodern American Poetry,” *Prospects* 14 (October 1989): 407–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0361233300005809>, 413.

other interpretations of the relationship between the self and the other, which suggest a plethora of “adjective” sublime coined by writers to capture something ineffably complex, awe-inspiring, or alien.

A Gendered Approach

My descriptions of the sublime thus far have demonstrated its potency as an aesthetic condition and a political apparatus. However, I buried the lede by intentionally omitting one prominent feature of the sublime – the subject has always been masculine. All the images I have used thus far show a masculine-coded figure facing the unknown. While it might seem that the sublime is a reliable and universal expression, it has always been gendered.

The one confronting the sublime is a masculine subject whose transcendence is punctuated by patriarchal articulations of control, power, and mastery. Early writings that became the canon texts on the sublime relied heavily upon metaphors of sexual differences to demonstrate the sublime’s incomprehensible otherness.²⁸ Gender played a role in the history of the sublime as early as Longinus’s *Peri Hypsous* (On the Sublime), on which I will further expand in Chapter 1.

Gender as a metaphor also shapes the discourse of Japan’s postwar identity. For instance, Yoshikuni Igarashi observes that postwar Japan changed from its colonial

²⁸ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

masculine identity to a feminine one that reflects the power dynamic between the United States and postwar Japan.²⁹ Drafting the ideal nation-state subject in postwar Japan has also been a negotiation for parameters of masculinity, which I further elaborate on in Chapter 2.

The symmetry between the sublime's implicit masculine coding and the masculine configuration of the nation-state subject allows me to challenge the seemingly universal, apolitical, and gender-neutral façade of (post)apocalyptic settings.

Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate that perpetually apocalyptic fiction is often a coming-of-age story in a world under constant crisis. World-ending threats bubble under the banality of everyday life, waiting to erupt. They are allegories of the challenges Japan has been facing since the end of the Cold War. More importantly, femininity helps to shape masculinity by negotiating with patriarchal configurations of power and control.

What makes my intervention possible is a giant woman who appears at the end of the world. *The End of Evangelion* (1997), the theatrical remake of the last two episodes of the animated series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995 – 1996), popularized the giant woman as a compelling and enduring visual representation of death and rebirth. In the film's final moments, we see a translucent feminine figure emerge from the depths of

²⁹ Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: University Press, 2000), 14.

the Earth and dissolve all living creatures into one, simultaneously destroying and remaking the world (figure 0.4).



Figure 0.4. A giant feminine figure emerges from the ocean in *The End of Evangelion* (1997).

I focus on three processes to understand her significance as a visual culture icon and stand-in for the apocalypse. The first process concerns her temporality and spatiality. She appears at the end of a world plagued with constant crises. Her overwhelming scale and power render her beholder insignificant, or in other words, she is sublime. The second process articulates the experience of her beholders. Since the beholder of the giant woman is often coded masculine, how does she challenge or uphold patriarchal ideals? The final process lingers on the role of gender in constructing a perpetually apocalyptic world. The giant woman has appeared in several popular Japanese texts since the 1990s across many mediums. Her femininity exposes

patriarchal configurations of power and control in stories and settings that often appear universal and apolitical.

The Magic Ritual of the Giant Woman at the End of the World

Though the image of a giant feminine figure can be traced back to several civilization's creation myths, she becomes a compelling and enduring figure awaiting the end of the world in post-postwar Japanese popular media.

In Chapter 1, I gather the materials for her conjuration by contextualizing Japan's lost era, or post-postwar, characterized by precarity, isolation, and stagnation. I invoked monster theory to explain why monsters have become a staple in Japan's popular media since WWII. Their monstrous body and sublime qualities make them a powerful vehicle for working through history that is difficult to metabolize.

In Chapter 2, I summon the giant woman through a close reading of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (EVA), in which she appears as the harbinger of the end. As one of the earliest examples, or even the first, of using the giant woman as an allegory of calamity, *EVA* cites psychoanalytic theories to contemplate the sense of precarity permeating post-postwar Japan. *EVA* has been credited with creating the genre of *sekai-kei*, works that often combine apocalyptic crises with school romance. *EVA's* balance between the banality of everyday life and the sublime threat of the apocalypse paves the way for other works to use similar settings to tell coming-of-age stories that reflect the changing social reality of post-postwar Japan. *EVA's* thematic emphasis on coming to terms with the apocalypse allows me to frame the setting

where the giant woman appears as “perpetually apocalyptic,” in which a world-ending event can erupt from the banality of everyday living.

In Chapter 3, I challenge her in my analysis of the 1997 video game *Final Fantasy VII* and articulate the role of femininity in constructing and deconstructing patriarchal subjects. I contrast different representations of masculinity and femininity in the game and posit that femininity reflects the shifting definitions of masculinity, whereas femininity lacks ontological consistency. Through the medium of video games, I explore how play as a form of labor adds to the tragedy of loss through the death of Aerith, a prominent female character of the game. In contrast, I invoke the alien mother figure, Jenova, to explore how femininity functions as a scapegoat for the undesirable qualities of the masculine ideal. These two feminine figures, with opposing metaphoric functions, do not have a prominent dialog, yet their presences loom over the masculine hero and villain.

In Chapter 4, I channel the giant woman’s sublimity to explore Japan’s post-postwar modernity through the video game *Death Stranding* (2019). I use the sublime to consider how the digital landscape encourages alternative attitudes toward past trauma and future precarity. I linger on the double role of Bridget/Amelia as the mother and the villain to unveil the gendered configurations of power, identity, and apocalypse. *Death Stranding*, another example of the perpetually apocalyptic setting, enacts different registers of the sublime to reflect Japan’s post-postwar modernity and create a universal existential contemplation about isolation and crisis.

In Chapter 5, I dispel her in my reading of *Paprika* (2006) by demonstrating that the giant woman is not an ontological entity. She is a sublime object constructed to reveal the perils of patriarchal subjects. I closely read the film and explored the metaphoric function of femininity in constructing patriarchal subjects. I examine the film's engagement with cultural discourse using anime as a medium and its criticisms of the medium by following the women in director Satoshi Kon's work. I explain that the giant woman at the end of the world in *Paprika* is not functionally distinctive from other expressions of femininity in Kon's oeuvre. Though she appears as the *deus ex machina* who saves the world, the giant woman embodies the symptoms of the giant man by exposing and rejecting his patriarchal ideals. While she is a compelling agent who speaks to past trauma and future precarity, what she ultimately unveils is the patriarchal understandings of power, control, and identity. Through these steps, I dispel the magical uniqueness of the giant woman I set up in the earlier chapters.

The giant woman is a compelling figure who signals something beyond comprehension and language. As compelling as she can be, she remains a feminine metaphor for otherness. Her sublimity exposes the gendered configurations of identity, civilization, precarity, and apocalypse because the one standing in front of her is a patriarchal subject who must come to terms with threats outside his control. The giant woman will be an enduring figure in popular media, especially in perpetually apocalyptic settings.

But the world will not end or be saved by her, as depicted in these stories. The giant woman is the ultimate expression of the threat posed to the patriarchal understanding of identity. The only thing the giant woman threatens to end is the patriarchal ideals.

In Chapter 6, I move away from the giant woman to consider a non-patriarchal configuration of precarity. This final chapter is a feminist intervention and uses the feminine sublime and the abject to consider death as a process that embraces the erosion between the self and the other. Using the animated television series *The Woman Called Fujiko Mine* as an example, written and produced by women, I explore how the sublime can encourage different relationships between the self and the other.

With that, let us do and undo some magic.

CHAPTER 1: Sublime Giants

Both created in the 1950s, the peace-loving Atomu, or Astro Boy (*Tetsuwan Atomu*), and the world-destroyer Godzilla stand as contradicting embodiments of nuclear power, articulating different rationales for the sense of loss. Atomu mourns the past by converting nuclear power for good, whereas Godzilla melancholically aims its atomic blast at Japan's postwar recovery. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok expand on Sigmund Freud's theory on grief by differentiating mourning and melancholia.¹ Subjects mourn by "incorporating" the lost object into their daily existence, whereas those who refuse to mourn become melancholic. The melancholic subjects "introject" the lost object without metabolization.

If Atomu represents a productive mourning process by taming the destructive force for good, Godzilla expresses melancholia as it stomps on Japan's postwar prosperity. The timing of these two nuclear monsters is remarkable as they are released around the signings of the Treaty of Peace with Japan in 1951 and the Japan–U.S. Mutual Security Treaty in 1952. These treaties allowed Japan to negotiate a new identity, stipulated with a mission for peace and a complicated but favorable relationship with the United States. Though these figures seem to occupy two dialectic negations of

¹ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume 1*, ed. Nicholas T. Rand, 1st edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 125.

postwar Japan's nuclear discourse, stories featuring Atomu and Godzilla remain ambivalent as their sentiment toward the Second World War oscillates between mourning and melancholia.

As Japanese popular media evolved throughout the postwar era, a parade of nuclear-allegory entities shaped Japan's modernity. Though some of these creatures moved away from nuclearity, they are still united aesthetically, ideologically, and politically through their sublimity. This dissertation, therefore, enacts the sublime as an aesthetic condition, a political apparatus, and a psychoanalytic framework to explore understandings of identity, nationhood, civilization, and apocalypse projected onto the bodies of these nuclear-allegory entities. I cited Jeffery Cohen in the introductory chapter as he theorizes the body of monsters as that of the culture. The central sublime figure of my dissertation is the giant woman, who joins the monster parade in 1997 when she appears in the animated film *The End of Evangelion*. As the harbinger of calamity, this giant feminine figure overwhelms the audience with her enormous scale and immense power.

Though I cannot say with certainty that this giant woman inspired followers, we can find her waiting at the end of the world in other lost era media, such as the video game *Drakengard* (2003), the animated film *Paprika* (2006), and the video game *Death Stranding* (2019). Directed and written by men, most of these works feature a male protagonist who must encounter and confront a giant woman by the end of his journey. Remarkably, before transforming into their gigantic form, these women often

take on a nurturing (or motherly) role to the male protagonist. This aspect arguably adds to their uncanny horror as their enlarged body perverts what used to feel comfortable and familiar. I argue that the giant feminine body is a site onto which complicated feelings (fear, desire, and anxiety) toward modernity (or Japan's post-postwar precarity) are projected. The giant woman contrasts sharply with the nuclear robots and atomic monsters. Her femininity should render her a softer expression of the sublime, yet she is a horrifyingly beautiful threat to the patriarchal subject. Despite her association with the beautiful, which is often set against the masculine-coded sublime, the giant woman is sublime.

A Gendered Approach to the Sublime

To understand the giant woman as a sublime object, it is significant to view the sublime through the lens of gender. As I explained in the introduction, the visual potency of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) also silently defines the subject as masculine. Therefore, a gendered approach to the sublime allows me never to assume any experience as universal or genderless. Longinus's *Peri Hypsous* has been referenced as the first text on the sublime, in which gender plays a significant role.² Barbara Claire Freeman notes that as the only woman in the collection, Sappho of Lesbos takes a different approach to excess, a

² Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Second edition., The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 35.

vital aspect of the sublime.³ Rather than aspiring to command mastery over excess, Sappho is willing to be subsumed by it.⁴ When confronting an ineffably irrepresentable other, Sappho does not wish to overcome it but finds a need for “the unlimited in which to lose herself.”⁵ Sappho’s poem describes a dying moment as ecstasy, which radically challenges Longinus’s conceptions of the sublime. Freeman frames Sappho’s radical embrace of death as the feminine sublime where the self is subsumed by the other.

Indeed, the sublime has always been discursively constructed as masculine. Philip Shaw observes that the sublime stress on mastery, which manifested into literary rivalries between poets such as William Wordsworth and John Milton.⁶ “To be sublime,” Shaw argues, “(male) poets must wrest the potency of another poet.”⁷ In this logic, the sublime is attainable through the patriarchal demonstration of excellence. Shaw bolsters his argument by noting a lack of female authors in Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, which not only universalizes the masculine identity as the default but only uses women “as a mode of excess to be encountered and overthrown.”⁸

³ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ Michael J. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime, Thought in the Act* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

The gendered coding of the sublime is most evident in its comparison to the beautiful. Edmund Burke explicitly genders the sublime as masculine and the beautiful feminine. Burke conceptualized the sublime and the beautiful as aesthetic categories against the backdrop of the French Revolution, where the former embodies the “masculine” strife for self-preservation in the face of terror and peril, and the latter is linked to “feminine” emotions, such as weakness and tenderness.⁹ Critics such as Terry Eagleton observed that Burke’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is that “between woman and man.”¹⁰ Linking femininity to the beautiful, Burke writes that “the beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it.”¹¹ Reflecting upon the universality of Burke’s aesthetic project, Freeman challenges the validity of Burke’s theoretic foundation that is built on assumptions about sexual difference.¹²

Immanuel Kant considers the sublime and the beautiful as judgments of tastes, which suggest they are not properties of nature but the mind. Also conceptualized during the French Revolution, Kant’s sublime is intertwined with struggles for power, liberty, and mastery. Of course, Kant also thinks about the distinction between the two

⁹ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 48.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, “The Ideology of the Aesthetic,” *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988): 327–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772692>, 330.

¹¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, 101.

¹² Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 49.

through a gendered lens. Shaw observes that Kant configures the beautiful as an uncomplicated positive feeling about life but positions the sublime between attraction and repulsion.¹³ As motivating forces, Shaw observes that “[I]t is beautiful, in other words, to think that we love our children more than we love ourselves; it is sublime to sacrifice one’s child for the sake of the truth.”¹⁴ Kant stresses the transcendental potential of the sublime by setting it against the beautiful, which Shaw argues shows “clear affinities with the discourse of psychoanalysis.”¹⁵

I concur with Shaw that the sublime’s interest in the dynamic between the self and the other is symmetrical to that of many psychoanalytic theories. Take the Oedipus complex as an example. Thomas Weiskel effectively links the drama of the sublime with the Oedipus complex, where the subject matures (transcends) by eradicating the symbolic father.¹⁶ The tragedy of Oedipus, who inadvertently fulfilled a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother, is one of the foundational texts of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud expands Oedipus’s story into a psychoanalytic theory to describe young men’s maturation, which renders psychoanalysis a potent tool for deciphering patriarchal configurations of identity while neglecting the feminine perspective. The self is not reserved for the feminine. When describing femininity, Freud once used the metaphor of “dark continent”, which is akin to descriptions of

¹³ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 100.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 93.

the sublime other. Female sexuality is the ultimate otherness that is indefinable and unknown. Commenting on Freud's metaphor, Rajana Khanna argues that "perhaps fearing her difference, he makes her other, obliterating the specificity and difference of her body by turning it into a fetishized metaphor of the unknown: 'dark continent,' and it is defined as lack."¹⁷ While it is crucial to remain critical of psychoanalysis, it is because it prioritizes the masculine subject that it helps to reveal the patriarchal process of othering. The dark continent is a feminine metaphor that signals fears, desires, and anxieties for the unknown, which resonates with the sublime. Because the sublime was shaped by a preexisting construction of "the feminine" both in literature and psychoanalysis, I agree with Freeman's proposition to read the sublime "as an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal subject."¹⁸

I expand on Freeman's proposal by adding Jacques Lacan's conception of the sublime and sublimation, which elucidate the process of patriarchal identity formation.

Lacan's theorization of the sublime differs from the Romantic or postmodern traditions so much that it is often omitted from discussions. Like the rhetoric of the sublime, Lacanian psychoanalysis traffics in assumptions about sexual differences. To fully understand the role of gender in the Lacanian sublime, we must consider some of his principal thoughts. Lacan uses Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic conception of

¹⁷ Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 49.

¹⁸ Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 4,

the signifier and the signified to suggest the two's arbitrary relation.¹⁹ Taking the line between the signifier and the signified as an uncrossable border, Lacan highlights the impossibility of reaching the signified, and thus, the staggering desire to attempt to cross over. Dwelling on this impossibility, Lacan argues that we must reconcile with the parts of us that cannot be accessed and recognize that our desire for wholeness is illusory.²⁰

What makes Lacan's idea important to this dissertation is that there are things that can occupy the place of the impossible-real object of desire, which are called sublime objects.²¹ Lacan explores this dynamic further in his theorization of the Mirror Stage. He highlights a split created when an infant encounters its mirror image and realizes its identity is not singular.²² The infant can no longer uphold the fantasy of wholeness as its identity is fractured into an "I" as a subject and "I" as an object.²³ In Lacanian terms, those who fail to recognize the split remain beholden to what he calls the Imaginary, as they refuse to view their identity as an effect of language. Infants formulate their subjectivity through what he calls the Symbolic, constituted by preexisting linguistic and social structures, by participating in the world as imperfect

¹⁹ John Gasperoni, "The Unconscious is Structured Like a Language," *Qui Parle* 9, no. 2 (1996): 77–104, 91.

²⁰ Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (Albany: State Univ of New York Pr, 2003), 18.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition (London New York: Verso, 2009), 221.

²² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, 1st edition (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 76.

²³ *Ibid.*, 76.

individuals. This process forces the subject to give up the sense of wholeness, instigating a life-long desire for the Other. Human's desire for wholeness enables the subjects to realize that any signifier for "mother," such as the word itself, cannot substitute for the signified mother or the real thing. Lacan argues that the lost object can never be possessed and can only be represented negatively through its absence as a void. In more familiar terms, it is an empty hole in one's heart that can never be filled, at least never fully.

Lacan's sublime comes from Freud's sublimation, which refers to the libido being translated into material objects that have no apparent relation to one's genuine desire. Though not rooted in the Romantic or postmodern configurations of the sublime, the Real and the Thing's unknowable and unrepresentable nature irradiates sublimity. To help illustrate the sublime object, I will use Lacan's response to Melanie Klein's analysis of a woman, who falls into depression after the removal of a painting on the wall.²⁴ The woman yearns to fill that blank whenever she gazes upon the lighter contour of the empty space. She beautifully paints her mother in that space and recovers thanks to the process. While Klein attributes the woman's transformation to recovering her mother's lost body through painting, Lacan argues that the woman only raises her mother to the dignity of the Thing."²⁵ The woman addressed the empty

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, NY London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 116.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

feeling, or the Thing, by sublimating her desire for wholeness, or the Real, into a painting of someone she lost. Therefore, the woman's mother is sublime (in Lacanian terms).

While Lacan's theorization seems to be universal as he comments on a female patient, the proliferation of his sublime object often fails to recognize women as ontological entities. Slavoj Žižek extends Lacan's sublime into the realms of politics, aesthetics, and ideologies. Žižek poignantly highlights the role of women as sublime objects through a close reading of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997).²⁶ The film bifurcates femininity into two opposing expressions of sexuality. Renee is the withdrawn and unavailable wife of the protagonist, Fred. Contrastingly, Alice is the untamable and too-available object of desire for Pete. The film later reveals that Fred murders Renee due to her unavailability and reimages Renee as Alice while he transforms into Pete. Different actors play Fred and Pete, yet Renee and Alice are played by the same, with modifications to suggest her sexual availability to the men. What turns the ideal version of Fred, Pete, back into his original form is Alice's whisper of "You will never have me!" Philip Shaw argues that Žižek's theorization of Lynch's images of women "conform to the Lacanian thesis of woman as the foreclosed or sublime object of patriarchal discourse, a thesis warranting the oft-cited and much-misunderstood

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek and Marek Wieczorek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, First Edition (Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, 2000), 3.

assertion that woman, as such, does not exist.”²⁷ In other words, femininity serves as a foil to the masculine subject or as a "symptom of men," a Lacanian concept reworked by Slavoj Žižek. Using the femme fatale archetype in film noir as an example, Žižek argues that these powerful women are liberated since they do not need men to exist.²⁸ In this logic, what makes women powerful is their unknowability. As the embodiment of the dark continent, women (namely the femme fatale) seem to possess power over men.

The sublime is tangled in metaphors of sexual differences, yet we often assume it is not about gender. Žižek’s argument for feminine power is a male fantasy. Sarah Herbold cites Teresa de Laurentis to frame Žižek's usage of femininity as transhistorical because he fails to distinguish between women as a fictional construct and real historical beings.²⁹ Nonetheless, the sublime object remains helpful in understanding the role of gender in the construction of patriarchal subjectivity. Only by exposing its gendered assumptions about sexual difference can we enact the sublime to deconstruct patriarchal beliefs about power, control, and mastery.

²⁷ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Second edition., The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 203.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Revised edition. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 176.

²⁹ Sarah Herbold, “Well-Placed Reflections: (Post)Modern Woman as Symptom of (Post)Modern Man,” *Signs* 21, no. 1 (1995): 83–115, 83.

A Gendered Approach to Memory and Identity

Outside theories, the narrativization of nation-state identity is also laced with gender metaphors. In *Bodies of Memory*, Yoshikuni Igarashi argues that postwar Japan constructed a gendered relationship that reflects the power dynamic between the United States and Japan.³⁰ Though Japan assumed the dominant masculine role in relations with its feminized colonies in popular texts before and during WWII, its later defeat and occupation recast postwar Japan into a feminine one in opposition to the powerful masculine United States.³¹ This gendered reconfiguration not only disciplines Japan by symbolically castrating its wartime masculine (colonial) power but also gives postwar Japan a feminized body characterized by its wartime trauma. Igarashi builds this idea on the emperor's feminized image, extrapolating from a photograph between General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito. The bodily difference between the American General, who embodies the might of American forces, and the once mighty emperor adds to the gendered visual language of the photograph as the emperor takes the bride's tradition and becomes the feminine other (figure 1.1).³²

³⁰ Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: University Press, 2000), 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³² Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 32.



Figure 1.1. General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito.

This photograph conveys the power dynamic between the two nations through recourse to metaphors of sexual difference. Similar to Herbold's criticism of Žižek's

definition of femininity, Ayako Kano also uses the term "transhistorical" to highlight how gender—femininity, to be more precise—has been employed by some Japanese male thinkers as a metaphor to create a persuasive narrative of Japan's uniqueness, perseverance, and endurance, particularly in the postwar context.³³ Kano further argues that the danger of transhistorical femininity, in the Japanese context, is twofold: it maintains the status quo of gender relations in Japan; and it serves to obscure Japan's masculine relation with its prewar Asian colonies.³⁴

Scholars like Kano and Igarashi seem to suggest that certain narratives about a feminine Japan allow the nation-state to slip into the feminine victim role. Many of these types of narratives are formulated around the atomic bombings. James Orr observes that the official's symmetrical alignment between the Pearl Harbor Attack and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki perpetuated "narratives of militarists victimizing an oppressed Japanese people."³⁵ Igarashi uses the "foundational narrative" to offer an insight into an alternative perspective on Japan's victimhood.³⁶ Constructed to explain and metabolize the atomic bombings, the foundational

³³ Ayako Kano, "Toward a Critique of Transhistorical Femininity," in *Gendering Modern Japanese History*, ed. Barbara Molony and Kathleen S. Uno, Harvard East Asian Monographs 251 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 520–54., 544.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 546.

³⁵ James Joseph Orr, *Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu, HI, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 78.

³⁶ Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory.*, 14.

narrative hints at the bombings as a necessary evil that ended Imperial Japan and gave rise to modernized nation-state.³⁷

Bringing Igarashi and Orr together, I argue that the foundation narrative and the victim-to-hero identity reconfigure postwar Japan's assumed femininity by highlighting more positive feminine traits such as endurance and perseverance. Instead of denying its feminization, postwar Japan leverages femininity to sever ties to its wartime atrocities while paving the path for an alternative masculine identity for postwar subjects to adopt. In Chapter 2, I discuss in detail the formulation of masculine nation-state subjectivity through feminine metaphors.

Sublime Entities of Postwar Japan

I proposed a gendered reading of the sublime and discourse around Japan's nation-state identity to highlight their shared affinities for gendered metaphors. In this context, we shall look at the sublime entities in Japanese film, manga (Japanese comics), and anime (Japanese animation). Now let us return to the peace-loving Atomu and the world-destroyer Godzilla who are different expressions of the sublime.

To understand their impact on Japan and global visual culture, we must explore how their bodies function as sites of discourse. I propose two distinct yet sometimes intertwining categories: the monstrous and the mechanical, inspired by Igarashi's

³⁷ Ibid., 48.

work on postwar literature. The mechanical body is an allegory for control, whereas the monster emerges when control ceases. The monstrous conjures sublime images of imminent annihilation, and the mechanical summons hopes for technologies to convert the destructive force for good.

The Monstrous

Kaiju, which translates to strange (*kai*) beasts (*ju*), is perhaps the best example of the monstrous. From Godzilla to its infamous successors like Mothra and Gamera, Kaiju as a construct all emerge as a threat from the ocean. The name Godzilla, *gojira* in Japanese, resembles the giant marine creature whale or *kujira*. Kaiju's tenuous relationship to the ocean makes them ocean (*kai*) beasts (*ju*). My not-so-clever pun here connects the sublimity of the kaiju to the elemental fear of the ocean. Besides its scale, Godzilla's monstrosity is linked to nuclear sublime, specifically radiation poisoning. The 1954 film was partially inspired by the Lucky Dragon incident on March 1 of the same year.³⁸ A Japanese fishing vessel was caught in the fallout from the US military's "Castle Bravo" hydrogen bomb test at Bikini Atoll. One crewmember died from radiation poisoning and the contaminated catch instigated panic about purchasing fish. Like the incident, Godzilla is awakened by an American

³⁸ Nick Kapur, *Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; Harvard University Press, 2018), 16.

nuclear test.³⁹ In addition to ocean's sublime vastness, what is more terrifying than an entity that has been feeding you decides to kill you?

Besides Friedrich's "Wanderer," Katsushika Hokusai's 1829 woodblock print, "Under the Wave off Kanagawa," informs studies of the sublime as an aesthetic condition. Three boats face potential destruction as a giant wave overwhelms them. The wave expresses extraordinary motion as it encases the boats and Mount Fuji in the distance. Threatening the mountain symbolizing immortality, the wave embodies a force beyond comprehension. Christine Guth argues that the painting resonated with its Japanese audience during the Edo period as foreign influences took hold in Japan.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁰ Christine M. E. Guth, "Hokusai's Great Waves in Nineteenth-Century Japanese Visual Culture," *The Art Bulletin* 93, no. 4 (2011): 468–85, 469.



Figure 1.2. *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* from Katsushika Hokusai's series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*.

The once divine and nurturing waves became an alien threat (figure 1.2). The sublime quality of “Under the Wave” makes it a compelling vehicle for political and cultural discourse. Stefan Helmreich builds on Guth’s work by observing the painting’s contemporary adaptations that contemplate global environmental disasters, natural and manmade.⁴¹ Helmreich elegantly frames the painting as a lasting icon that informs people’s understanding of disasters and responsibilities. In addition to the scale, the wave’s monstrosity is heightened by its uncanniness. Sigmund Freud coined

⁴¹ Stefan Helmreich, “Hokusai’s Great Wave Enters the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2016): 203–17, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616407>, 204.

“the uncanny” to describe the horror of finding the familiar unrecognizable. Michael Chemers uses the uncanny and combines Jeffery Jerome Cohen’s theory of monsters to examine the journey of the Golem from a creature in Jewish folklore to a paradoxical icon in stories reflecting on the legacies of the Holocaust.⁴² Chemers is intrigued by the Golem’s temporality as an ancient and uncanny monster summoned amid troubled times.⁴³

Reading monstrosity in conjunction with the sublime and the uncanny, it is unsurprising that Godzilla has dominated people’s imagination since 1954. As soon as the nuclear monster debuted in *Godzilla* (1954), Godzilla amazed people with its sheer destructive force and enormous scale. Not only a box office hit in Japan, but *Godzilla* also became a globally celebrated franchise. The monster is now a global icon and, according to William M. Tsutsui, serves as the “first introduction to Japanese popular culture” and Japan itself.⁴⁴ Emerging from the peaceful ocean, Godzilla mirrors the great wave and poses an existential threat. The film explicitly attributes underwater hydrogen bomb testing to the mutated body of the monster and effectively ties Godzilla to the atomic bombings. Godzilla’s nuclear body is further accentuated through images of deaths in Tokyo and Japanese bodies suffering from radiation sickness. Though Godzilla is killed by the end, a character dreadfully warns

⁴² Michael M. Chemers, *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness* (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁴ William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Itō, *In Godzilla’s Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 2.

of its return, guaranteed by continued nuclear weapons testing. If “Under the Wave” portrays anxiety toward foreign forces during Edo Japan, Godzilla inspires similar fear through its radioactive body and destructive potential in postwar Japanese people. William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Ito’s edited collection, *In Godzilla’s Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stages*, carefully considers Godzilla’s persistent cultural impact from diverse perspectives. Tsutsui argues that Godzilla materialized the preexisting fascination about nuclear power, mutation, and apocalypse.⁴⁵ Godzilla and its subculture meditate on postwar Japan’s “pervasive sense of alienation intertwined with an enduring sentimentality” and the paradoxical pairing of a conviction of pacifism and an obsession with weaponry.⁴⁶

Borrowing Chemers’ configurations of the Golem, I also want to propose Godzilla as a paradoxical figure that embraces contradicting sentiments about the past. Godzilla’s ability to awe, overwhelm, and inspire alternative forms of remembrance lends itself to being a persuasive political apparatus. Michael J. Shapiro’s political sublime points to images and narratives that have the power to “lay siege to the institutionalized forms of quiescence and passivity that turn events into impregnable monuments.”⁴⁷ Stubborn and Indignant, Godzilla melancholically challenges any narrative closure to the atomic bombings. One could say that Godzilla is politically sublime. Susan

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁷ Michael J. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime, Thought in the Act* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 172.

Napier also argues that Godzilla conveys the lived reality of postwar Japan to the global audience.⁴⁸ As an embodiment of the other, Godzilla challenged established narratives about Japan and its wartime trauma.⁴⁹ Moreover, Anne Allison offers a sympathetic view of the monster by linking the Japanese people to the monster. Citing producer Tanaka Tomoyuki, Allison proposes to see Godzilla as a cathartic sublimation of the suppressed anger of the Japanese people.⁵⁰ Allison suggests that the Japanese audience could identify with the monster to relive “the terrors of the war relieved of any guilt or responsibility.”⁵¹

While it is tempting to associate Godzilla with nuclearity, the monster is not a static figure. As a cultural icon, Godzilla changes according to its era. Yoshikuni Igarashi examines three films featuring Godzilla and Mothra, another fictional giant monster emerging from the sea, and locates a parallel between the changing images of the monster and the improving economic and cultural conditions of postwar Japan.⁵² Reading the monsters through capitalist endeavors in the 1960s, Igarashi comments on how the studio capitalized on the original film's success by taming monsters into toys.⁵³ Capitalism and globalization ensured the legacy of Godzilla and the kaiju that

⁴⁸ Susan Jolliffe Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, First edition. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁰ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, *Millennial Monsters* (University of California Press, 2006), 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵² Yoshikuni Igarashi, “Mothra’s Gigantic Egg: Consuming the South Pacific in 1960s Japan,” in *In Godzilla’s Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage*, ed. William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Itō (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 83–102, 84.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.

came after, yet at times, diluted its original social criticism. It is, however, almost impossible to ignore Godzilla's postwar identity, despite future iterations, when it breathes atomic blasts while trampling Japanese landscapes. Mutated and empowered by nuclear energy, Godzilla's body represented the irreversible consequences of the war. Of course, Godzilla is not the only influential entity that seeks to represent the atomic bombings. Allison notes that *Godzilla* presents the postwar conditions as dystopian, but *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Mighty Atom or Atomu) offers a utopian outlook for the future.⁵⁴

The Mechanical

Though not visually ineffable compared to Godzilla, Atomu's sublimity comes from its mastery of nuclear power. Atomu is both a nuclear robot and a sublime object of his creator, Dr Tenma, who sculpts him in the image of his deceased son Tobio. It is also noteworthy that Atomu, in many ways, sets the aesthetic foundation of modern Japanese anime. Though manga and anime predate WWII, Atomu's creator, Osamu Tezuka, created numerous manga that continue to shape Japanese visual culture.⁵⁵

Eiji Otsuka uses Tezuka's *Ambassador Atom* (1951), the series introducing the iconic Atomu, to highlight his conflicted feelings towards Japan's postwar pacifism and relationship with the United States.⁵⁶ Tezuka's postwar manga combines realistic

⁵⁴ Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 11.

⁵⁵ Thomas LaMarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 300.

⁵⁶ ŌTSUKA EIJI and Thomas LaMarre, "Disarming Atom: Tezuka Osamu's Manga at War and Peace," *Mechademia* 3, no. 1 (2008): 111–25, 111.

portrayals of weapons with antirealistic Disney-esque characters. These jarring juxtapositions reveal Tezuka's desire for weapon disarmament and ambivalence towards the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima.⁵⁷ Tezuka reconciled himself with the Disney-esque expression and the Americanism by projecting his complicated feelings onto the canvas that became Atomu – a good-natured atomic robot symbolizing peace and perseverance.⁵⁸ Atomu's Disney-esque quality, characterized by his big eyes, stylized spiky hair, and racially ambiguous design, is the perfect vehicle for Tezuka to make a political statement without directly referencing the trauma of the war. Additionally, Thomas LaMarre argues that Tezuka's focus on character design resulted from Japanese artists' adoption of limited animation as opposed to Disney's full animation.⁵⁹ Limited animation sacrifices the smoothness of full animation but leverages expressions and compelling designs to convey emotionality. Though this process is a result of budgetary restraints, it does help to center character design as the essence of anime.⁶⁰

The anime-esque body is simultaneously a technical and ideological response to the Disney-esque style. Hiroki Azuma coins the term *kyara moe* (cute character) to underscore the effectiveness of anime characters in eliciting emotional responses.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 204

⁶⁰ Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 16.

⁶¹ Hiroki Azuma et al., "The Animalization of Otaku Culture," *Mechademia* 2, no. 1 (2007): 175–87,182.

Noting the success of the animated television series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), Azuma argues that the series would not be as successful if not for the otaku enthusiasm for female characters. The Japanese term “otaku” refers to anime enthusiasts and is sometimes used derogatorily to suggest a lack of common social sense.⁶² Azuma embraces the otaku culture in his work to explain the emotional potency of anime character designs.⁶³ The proliferation of Tezuka’s work sets a standard for manga and anime. Japanese popular media eventually grew into a global giant, and traditions that grew from manga and anime practices will replace the Disney-esque style. The focus on the character design and control over the anime style creates a system of anime conventions. Stevie Suan coins the term “anime-esque” to highlight the series of performative acts conducted to maintain anime as a unique genre with a globally recognizable identity.⁶⁴

A somewhat unfortunate outcome of the proliferation of the anime-esque style is a lack of Asian racial representation in Japanese popular media. Koichi Iwabuchi suggests the lack of Asian signifiers in Japanese popular media is an intentional strategy. Iwabuchi famously coined "cultural odor" to describe the acute awareness of one's cultural origin and the desire to disassociate from it.⁶⁵ Such an odor is "closely

⁶² Patrick W Galbraith, *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan* (Duke University Press, 2019), 5.

⁶³ Azuma, “The Animalization of Otaku Culture,” 2007, 183.

⁶⁴ Suan, Stevie. “Anime’s Performativity: Diversity through Conventionality in a Global Media-Form.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, no. 1 (2017): 62–79., 63.

⁶⁵ Kōichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

associated with racial and bodily images of a country of origin."⁶⁶ This wariness of one's bodily odor is the catalyst of the erasure of Asian bodies in the global media landscape. Lived experiences are transformed into allegories and Asian bodies are rendered odorless. An anthology edited by Blai Guarné, Artur Lozano-Mendez, and D. P. Martinez provocatively states that despite a lack of direct references to WWII, Japanese audiovisual media has been a site of "the varied multifaced representations of the war."⁶⁷ Media is then a site of constant metabolization of wartime memories, which helps to inform strategies against future crises.

Though Atomu garnered global recognition due to its universality, assisted by its odorless body, other mechanical bodies, especially the battleship Yamato, are noticeably Japanese. Like other Japanese authors who lived through wartime turmoil and postwar recovery, Leiji Matsumoto mobilized manga and anime to meditate on the psychological and material legacies of the Second World War. Matsumoto's oeuvre creates an interconnected universe that reimagines postwar Japan's social and political realities. William Ashbaugh argues that the constellation of stories within this universe "enables Matsumoto to revisit war, victimhood, and the indiscriminate use of power."⁶⁸ Matsumoto does not revise a different outcome of WWII but projects

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28

⁶⁷ Blai Guarné, Artur Lozano-Mendez, and D. P. Martinez, *Persistently Postwar: Media and the Politics of Memory in Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 186.

⁶⁸ William Ashbaugh, "Contesting Traumatic War Narratives: Space Battleship Yamato And Mobile Suit *Gundam*," in *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan* (Brill, 2010), 327–53, https://brill.com/display/book/9789004193215/Bej.9789004182981.i-362_013.xml, 328.

past conditions of Japan into a fictional future where humankind must preserve against cosmic threats. Connecting a space war to postwar Japan's political reality, Matsumoto universalizes the Japanese experience through war-allegory anime, especially poignant in the case of *Space Battleship Yamato (SBY)*.

Broadcast in the 1970s, *SBY* did not receive high ratings but became popular through reruns. The original run of the series was born out of a moment when leftist sentiments, such as pacifism, were slowly countered by nationalist upsurge. Some examples include Japanese prime ministers began visiting Yasukuni Shrine to pay respects to WWII soldiers and modifications of history textbooks to lessen Japan's wartime atrocities in occupied Asian territories.⁶⁹ Ashbaugh observes that given the heightened nationalist revitalization of this period, it is fitting that the theatrical version of *SBY* opened on August 6, 1977.⁷⁰ *SBY*'s story adheres to certain criteria of the nationalist trends of the time and imagines a future where the Earth is bombarded by the planet Gamilon using radioactive asteroid bombs. Humans are forced to live underground, but the last hope is a retrofitted I.J.N Yamato that can fly through space. Yamato must retrieve two devices, gifted by the Queen of a lost planet, which enable humans to fight against the Garmillas fleet and save the Earth by scrubbing radiation. The radiation-laced asteroids allude to the atomic bombs, and the revitalization of the sunken Battleship Yamato becomes an exercise of Japan's unrealized militarist desire.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 336.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 337.

Of course, these two forces are pitted against each other and climax in the denouement where the crew of Yamato wins the fight by destroying the enemy combatants, their headquarters, and parts of the planet. The crew does not cheer for the victory but lament over the destruction of another civilization desperate to expand due to limited resources despite its violent means. I believe this reflection allows the Japanese audience to simultaneously identify with the humans and the alien threats, as one of the reasons for Japan's invasion of other Asian nations was its limited resources. Additionally, Ashbaugh evokes the "nobility of failure" traditions in Japanese literature to argue that this sentiment can promote nationalism by highlighting Japan's victimhood through the bombings and advocating the restoration of a full-fledged military, a cornerstone of Japan's right-wing nationalism through the triumph of Yamato crew.⁷¹

The fictional restoration and empowerment of Japan's most ambitious yet sunken battleship that bears the name of the ancient origin of the Japanese people supports Ashbaugh's argument. Ashbaugh is not alone in this assessment. Hiromi Mizuno juxtaposes postwar Japan's demilitarization and the Cold War era's anxiety through the gender lens and finds a feminized Japan under the protection of the masculine-coded United States.⁷² Mizuno teases out *SBY*'s "shifting ambivalence and tensions

⁷¹ Ibid., 340.

⁷² Hiromi Mizuno, "When Pacifist Japan Fights: Historicizing Desires in Anime," *Mechademia* 2, no. 1 (2007): 104–23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.0.0007>, 105.

around national and masculine desires of pacifist Japan.”⁷³ Mizuno recognizes a nationalist desire to be empowered and masculinized through *SBY*’s portrayals of a Japanese crew independently defeating the cosmic threat.⁷⁴ The desire for patriarchal masculine ideals is further supported by the overtly stereotypical gendered depictions of masculine and feminine cast members.⁷⁵ Importantly, overly feminized female characters and blue-skinned alien enemies help to distance viewers from the series’ nationalist undertone.⁷⁶

In contrast, Susan Napier sees the revamped battleship as a symbol of peace and love for the universe because it never initiates attacks and only defends.⁷⁷ Though not stated explicitly, Napier’s observation of the Yamato crew echoes postwar Japan’s Self-Defense Force that defines the borders of masculinity as protection and service. Since *SBY* welcomes contradicting sentiments toward WWII, scholars and critics hold distinct positions on the series’ messages, as demonstrated earlier. Kenji Satō takes issue with *SBY*’s mixed sentiment and argues that the story suffers from the power struggle between nationalistic imaginations and leftwing politics such as pacifism and internationalization.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁷ Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 24.

⁷⁸ Kenji Satō, *Gojira to Yamato to bokura no minshu shugi* (Tōkyō: Bungei Shunjū, 1992).

Shunichi Takekawa argues that the ship is a vehicle for fusing contradictory nationalist messages as it embodies prewar might, sunken defeat, and postwar trauma.⁷⁹ Instead of taking a stance on the exact message *SBY* suggests, Takekawa treats the body of the battleship as a site of discourse and suggests that as a part of the visual culture, Yamato-featured work is textured by their political milieu.⁸⁰ Takekawa highlights conflicting positions toward Japan's role during and after WWII throughout the development of the series into a franchise.⁸¹

The body of the sunken battleship ignites imaginations about Japan's postwar recovery and the collective trauma of the war. The body also changes its symbolism as new challenges emerge. Ikuho Amano identifies a renewed interest in *SBY* in Japan after the Fukushima incident. Amano argues that the series "generates an image of Japan in need of self-critique and remorse, while promoting a hope sustained through collaboration and social harmony."⁸² *SBY* reimagines Japan's past, present, and future by turning an old technological marvel into a new one that can surpass and subvert the sublime power of the atomic bombs. Yamato's body is, then, a site for shifting identities of the nation.

⁷⁹ Shunichi Takekawa, "Fusing Nationalisms in Postwar Japan: The Battleship Yamato and Popular Culture," Text (electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies, May 1, 2012), <https://japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol12/iss3/takekawa.html>, 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

⁸² Ikuho Amano, "From Mourning to Allegory: Post-3.11 Space Battleship Yamato in Motion," *Japan Forum* 26, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 325–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2014.915868>, 335.

Another instance of the mechanical body is the mecha, popularized by the *Gundam* series. These robots are not only overwhelming giants, but they also embody the technological sublime. Created around the same time as *SBY*, *Gundam* shares many similarities to *SBY*, from not being popular immediately upon release to, more importantly, featuring pilotable technologically advanced machines. In *Gundam*'s case, the machine is no longer a battleship but a giant robot (figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3. Promotional materials of *SBY* (left) and *Gundam* (right) highlight the overwhelming presence of the mechanical bodies.

Created by Tomino Yoshiyuki, *Gundam* is set in a distant future where humanity faces another existential threat in the form of a dictator of a cluster of space colonies named Degwin Sodo Zabi. Zabi intends to invade Earth and fails to do so until he orders to

hurl a colony at the planet, which creates large-scale nuclear fallout for a prolonged period. Zabi can then capture most of the Earth thanks to the devastated landscape and giant mobile suits in the form of sixty-foot-tall robots. *Gundam*'s story takes place a few months after the attack when the Earth's resistance group, The Federation, develops even more powerful mobile suits piloted by teenagers and young adults. These young individuals are thrust into a war. Despite their noble cause of protecting civilians and fending off enemies, the pilots experience sorrow, guilt, anger, and grief over their roles as child soldiers inside enormous killing machines.

As a war allegory, *Gundam* and *SBY* are similar as they are textured by WWII, from atomic bombing references to revitalization through technology. That said, Ashbaugh finds rationale and emotions toward war and violence in *Gundam* do not valorize the "nobility of failure" because heroic sacrifices produce nothing but grief in the series.⁸³ Furthermore, by linking essential dates and events in the fictional universe to Japan's invasion of China and later surrender, *Gundam* questions Japan's heightened victim role, widely embraced by right-wing nationalists.⁸⁴

Gundam serves as a fantastical reimagination for people touched by the war, but what makes *Gundam* universally compelling is the giant robots. The *Gundam* series has become so influential that it is credited with launching the genre of Mecha. Though both are galvanized by technological advancement, the relationship between the

⁸³ Ashbaugh, "Contesting Traumatic War Narratives," 348.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 346.

crewmates and the battleship is not the same as between the pilot and the mecha. The mecha forms an intimate relationship with the teenage pilot. The mechanical functions of the mecha further contextualize this intimacy. From offering protection and empowering the pilot to creating a space for reflection and catharsis, the mecha plays a parental role in the young pilot's development.

This intimate relationship makes the mecha genre a fertile ground for coming-of-age stories. Mecha stories pair larger-than-life apocalyptic threats with ordinary growing pains, one aspect of the perpetually apocalyptic setting. Frenchy Lunning argues that "mecha anime are generally narratives of male identity formation and subjectivity that are secured through the relationship and eventual unifying transcendence of the boy-child pilot with the mature image of masculine power and agency of the mecha."⁸⁵ Lunning links the era in which mecha animation reached its zenith to the proliferation of masculine narratives in mecha genre and suggests that there is a "profound consideration" for the formation of masculine identity.⁸⁶ Of course, not all mecha pilots are masculine, but the audience stand-ins are often teenage boys, not to mention that this genre is often marketed toward young men and boys. Taking a psychoanalytical approach, Lunning thinks through the theme of maturity through the oedipal stage using *RahXephon*, a mecha anime, as a case study. Taking Jacques Lacan's concept of the father, who separates the child from the mother's body,

⁸⁵ Frenchy Lunning, "Between the Child and the Mecha," *Mechademia 2*, no. 1 (2007): 268–82, 281.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

Lunning suggests the absence of the protagonist's father as a foreshadowing of his arrested development.⁸⁷ Ayato can only mature by merging with the mecha's body, a symbol of masculinity and a cure for his lack. When he becomes a transcended being through this process, Ayato is rewarded with a sense of normality.

The body of the *Gundam* is an expressive medium through which Japan materializes its postwar identity. Tatsumi argues that the origin of mecha is Robert A. Heinlein's 1959 novel *Starship Troopers*, which features a "powered suit" with mobilities and strength to outrank any enemy.⁸⁸ While the story is impactful, it was a rendition of the suit, featured as the cover of the translated version of the novel, published in 1977, that sparked the fever for robots.⁸⁹ Reflecting on the visuality of the power suit, the translator of Tatsumi's essay, Christopher Bolton, argues that the lack of visual description in *Starship Troopers* makes it an ironic origin for the proliferation of *Gundam* as a contemporary art object.⁹⁰ Bolton sees the bodies of *Gundam* as generative spaces for contextualizing the beholder's lived experience.⁹¹ Provocatively, Tatsumi references Donna Haraway's cyborg and links it to his earlier argument that postwar Japanese subjects are "Japanoids."⁹² By Japanoid, Tatsumi signals the discursive identity formation of the postwar subjects existing in a social

⁸⁷ Ibid., 280.

⁸⁸ Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, and Takayuki Tatsumi, eds., *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime*, 1st edition (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2007), 192.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 192.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 195

⁹¹ Ibid., 197.

⁹² Ibid., 197.

reality that lacks ideological certainties and means of self-protection.⁹³ Tatsumi finds the weakened postwar Japan “donning the protective suit of the U.S.– Japan Joint Security Treaty.”⁹⁴ Following this logic, one can argue that the Japanese body is a cyborg’s body.

Monstrous and Mechanical

Instead of looking at the monstrous and the mechanical as contradictory approaches to nuclear discourse, seeing them as two entry points into the same conversation about nuclearity is more productive. I categorize nuclear entities into the monstrous and the mechanical, but the dividing line is porous. A nuclear power plant is technologically sublime, but it is not faultless. The same can be said about Atomu. Alicia Gibson finds the monstrous within the peace-loving nuclear robot.⁹⁵ Atomu is a shadow of a dead boy whose absence continues to spark rage from Atomu’s creator and distrust from the community.⁹⁶ Gibson finds the shadow of Hiroshima sneaking up on Fukushima and the shadowy existence of Atomu as a continued conversation about nuclear energy.⁹⁷ Like Godzilla, Atomu’s bodily image does not change, but its cultural significance shifts.

⁹³ Ibid., 197.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁹⁵ Alicia Gibson, “Out of Death, an Atomic Consecration to Life: Astro Boy and Hiroshima’s Long Shadow,” *Mechademia: Second Arc* 8 (2013): 313–20, <https://doi.org/10.5749/mech.8.2013.0313>, 319.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 319.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 319.

Post-postwar Monsters

What happens if the monster is no longer an external threat but a part of one's existence? The lost era ushers in new considerations of nuclearity and modernity, often in the form of coming-of-age stories. The stagnation of demographic and economic growth and myriad concerns over man-made and natural disasters defined the Heisei period as the "Lost Era" (*ushinawareta jidai*). The Heisei period began in 1989 and ended in 2019 with Emperor Akihito's abdication. In *Locating Heisei in Japanese Fiction and Film*, Marc Yamada argues that Heisei was an era of crisis that undermined "the framework that gave meaning to the national identity" so much that popular media sought to establish an alternative relationship to the past while imagining a different future.⁹⁸ I adopt Anne Allison's "post-postwar" to highlight the era's sense of precarity.⁹⁹

Postwar Japan was a resurrected phoenix that became an economic, technological, and cultural giant. Post-postwar Japan is characterized by *lack*. Edited by Yoichi Funabashi and Barak Kushner, *Examining Japan's Lost Decades* is a collection of critical essays tackling Japan's "lost" qualities starting in the 1990s. According to the authors, "the seeds of lost decades were sown in 1989 and 1990, just after the death of

⁹⁸ Marc Yamada, *Locating Heisei in Japanese Fiction and Film*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2021), 10.

⁹⁹ Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan*, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 44.

Emperor Hirohito and just before the collapse of the bubble economy.”¹⁰⁰ Japanese government’s failure to address the preventable financial crises resulted in Japanese people’s loss of confidence, heightened by slow reactions to the Kobe Earthquake and Tokyo Sarin Gas attack in 1995.¹⁰¹ The lost decade turned into decades as Japan struggled to keep up with its exponential growth of the 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of economic powers like China. Low birth rates, precarious employment for the younger generation, and the 2011 earthquake and the ensuing Fukushima nuclear accident further punctuated the sense of loss. Notably, the Fukushima incident renewed discussions on nuclearity that have persistently impacted the social reality of Japanese people after 1945. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about more economic and social precarity and delayed the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. Perhaps the lost era will continue.

The sense of lack prompts reflection on the past and future. Coming-of-age stories became a staple of lost-era fiction, in which the past looms over one’s future. Harry Harootunian suggests that the 1990s should prompt a moment of reflection on Japan’s history “if the future is to look different from the present.”¹⁰² Yamada locates Harootunian’s call for reflection in lost-era media that mediated on the defeat of the

¹⁰⁰ Yoichi Funabashi and Barak Kushner, eds., *Examining Japan’s Lost Decades*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), xxv.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹⁰² Harry Harootunian, “Japan’s Long Postwar: The Trick of Memory and the Ruse of History,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2000): 715–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-99-4-715>, 724.

United Red Army in 1972 and the Tokyo Sarin Gas attack in 1995.¹⁰³ Yamada notes that by establishing a different relationship with the past, lost-era media breaks away from “the linear foundations of the metanarratives of high growth that guided experience throughout much of postwar Japan.”¹⁰⁴ Yamada skillfully positions coming-of-age stories in lost-era fiction as exercises of identity construction free from postwar Japan’s prescribed need for national growth.¹⁰⁵

An important monstrous figure of the lost era is the mutating gigantic flesh in Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira* (1988). Sublime and uncanny, the body mass grows exponentially and eventually encapsulates Japan’s past trauma and future precarity. The film follows a group of children living in post-apocalyptic Japan in 2019, devastated by a world war triggered by the destruction of Tokyo in 1988. The film culminates as one of the protagonists, Testuo, loses control of his power and mutates into growing flesh that eventually consumes most of Neo-Tokyo. Susan Napier sees the film “as a fresh expression of an alienated youth’s search for identity and as a cyberpunk meditation on apocalypse.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the grotesque growth that consumes Neo-Tokyo results from Tetsuo’s need and desire for power, the same power possessed by Akira, a supernaturally empowered individual responsible for Tokyo’s 1988 destruction (figure 1.4).

¹⁰³ Marc Yamada, *Locating Heisei in Japanese Fiction and Film*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2021), 14.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁰⁶ Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke*, 43.



Figure 1.4. Kaneda faces Tetsuo's giant mutating body.

By linking the monstrous body with past trauma and destroying the capital of postwar miraculous recovery, *Akira* moves away from the past in search of a new identity. In many ways, the mutating flesh in *Akira* serves similar functions as the body of Godzilla as a vehicle for identity exploration. The difference is that Godzilla is an external expression of postwar Japan's monstrous angst, whereas *Akira* locates the uncanny within the human body.

Nuclearity is not externalized as a monster but is a part of one's existence. Alan Wolfe orients postmodernism within the Japanese context. He suggests that "unlike for the West, postmodern means not nuclear sublime but postnuclear, and the issue is not whether survival is possible, but how to survive in what has always been recognized

as a precarious existence.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Japan has survived the bombings, yet the shadow of nuclear power ripped apart any sense of stability. Freda Freiberg builds on Wolfe’s argument by looking at Tetsuo’s body as an expression of the postnuclear sublime.¹⁰⁸ Tetsuo survives, and the world does not end in the film. The monsters survive and continue to live in a precarious world.

Similarly, but from a different entry point, the cyborg presents the horror of finding the other within the self. The cyborg is closer to humans, whose empowerment does not come from external tools like a ship or a mech. According to Haraway, the cyborg is “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”¹⁰⁹ Haraway is concerned with socialist feminism when she conceptualizes the metaphoric function of the cyborg, which renders its body a vehicle for social and cultural discourse.

The cyborg is inherently political. Published first a novel series, *Ghost in the Shell* is a Japanese cyberpunk-themed franchise written and illustrated by Masamune Shirow. Set in 21st-century Japan, the story follows the counter-cyberterrorist organization Public Security Section 9, led by protagonist Major Motoko Kusanagi. Oshii Mamoru

¹⁰⁷ Alan Wolfe, “Suicide and the Japanese Postmodern: A Postnarrative Paradigm?,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H D Harootunian (United States: Duke University Press, 1989), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12103bc.14>, 230.

¹⁰⁸ Freda Freiberg, “Akira and the Postnuclear Sublime,” in *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*, ed. Mick Broderick, Japanese Studies (London ; Kegan Paul International, 1996), 91–102, 100.

¹⁰⁹ Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Manifestly Haraway* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3–90, 5.

adapted the story into an animated film in 1995, which quickly became a seminal work. As a cyborg, Kusanagi's body belongs to the Bureau, which means her existence requires her to follow orders. Desired to be self-determinate, Kusanagi pulls her mechanical body apart to protest the mechanization of her identity. From the perspective of gender and capitalism, Joseph Christopher Schaub argues that the film "critiques capitalist ideology both by destroying the fetishizing effect of Kusanagi's feminized mechanical body and by depicting her as the agent of her body's destruction after acknowledging its reified state."¹¹⁰ Kusanagi's cyborg identity grants the audience a window into the social reality of global capitalism.¹¹¹

It is also imperative to reiterate that many Japanese popular texts in the lost era, though political, attempt to appear universal. Even a seminal text like *Ghost in the Shell*, which deals with gender and national identity, is haunted by the limits of odorless production, namely from a racial perspective. In 2017, *Ghost in the Shell* was adapted into an American live-action film. Accusations of whitewashing were levied in the United States, when it was announced that Scarlet Johansson would be cast in the role of Kusanagi.

When confronted with the concern of representation in an interview, Oshii rejected the whitewashing allegation by insisting that the film cast the best actors for the

¹¹⁰ Joseph Christopher Schaub, "Kusanagi's Body: Gender and Technology in Mecha-Anime," *Asian Journal of Communication* 11, no. 2 (2001): 79–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980109364805>, 98.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

job.¹¹² Stating he held no political agenda, Oshii first underscored his desire to create art free of politics to distance himself from racial discourse.¹¹³ He further defended the casting decision by adding that because *Ghost in the Shell*'s protagonist is a cyborg, she can be represented without racial concern.¹¹⁴ In the same interview, Oshii stated his disappointment in not being a part of the Hollywood adaptation.¹¹⁵ Hollywood interpreted what Oshii thought as a neutral body as a white body and then stripped Asian bodies and labor from its primary cast and production team. Oshii's desire to create "apolitical" art highlights his preference for global recognition over racial discourse without realizing the danger of self-erasure. Nevertheless, the mechanical and monstrous bodies are potent catalysts for identity exploration.

I concur with Wolfe's assessment of postmodernism in the Japanese context that there is greater attention paid to how to live with precarity instead of how to survive the apocalypse. Historical crises in the 1990s continued the feeling that Japan had been in perpetual crisis. *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell* are set in a post-apocalyptic future under new threats, rendering the world perpetually in crisis. The discourse around nuclear power and the government's failure reignites conversations about the precarious future of postwar Japan. This mixed sensibility, with fragmented temporalities from

¹¹² Osborn Alex, "An Interview with Director Mamoru Oshii on the live-action adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell*," IGN Japan, March 22, 2017, <https://jp.ign.com/ghost-in-the-shell-live-action-movie/12278/news/>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

the immediate postwar to the 1990s, engendered popular media texts that picture Japan and the world as perpetually apocalyptic. In this perpetually apocalyptic world, we find a giant woman who awaits the end of the world.

This chapter gathers the materials to summon the giant woman that haunts lost era media texts and beyond. The following chapters examine texts ranging from manga and animated series to animated films and video games. Despite their medium-specific differences, they deploy gender as metaphors through narrative and visual language. I will use gender as the overarching theme and the principal tool to analyze how gender is constructed and performed in relation to Japan's post-postwar discourse and expose the patriarchal undertone of these texts through the sublime.

CHAPTER 2: Monstrous Mother

To say *Neon Genesis Evangelion (EVA)* is a seminal work in the history of anime is an understatement. In addition to its impact on Japanese and global visual culture, academic considerations of the series form a kaleidoscope that continues to generate new perspectives. The series is also a kaleidoscope with numerous interpretations depending on the point of departure. *EVA* is a coming-of-age story with an apocalyptic setting. It is also a Lovecraftian horror about struggling against cosmic monsters bearing the names of biblical angels. *EVA* is a melodrama about the intricacy of navigating interpersonal relationships. It is also a praxis of psychoanalytic theories that ruminate on intimacy and isolation.

EVA draws on religious symbolisms from Judaism and Christianity. The title suggests the series as a “gospel of a new genesis.”¹ While rich in symbolism, *EVA*’s story does not follow the biblical texts, as Mariana Ortega argues.² *EVA*’s religious interpretations are mobilized to construct a world in need of a new order.

EVA sets the parameters for my configurations of the perpetually apocalyptic setting where world-ending calamity bubbles under the banality of everyday life. Its postmodernist theme reveals its origin as a lost-era product. Susan J. Napier cites Japan’s social turbulence in the 1990s as one of the reasons for the proliferation of

¹ Mariana Ortega, “My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in Neon Genesis Evangelion,” *Mechademia 2*, no. 1 (2007): 216–32, 217.

² *Ibid.*, 220.

apocalyptic settings in anime.³ Napier posits that troubling events became driving forces behind animated works like Miyazaki Hayano's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *EVA* as they express "profound anxieties about the future."⁴ Napier suggests *EVA* as an ambivalent coming-of-age story that does not purely celebrate maturity but focuses on the physical and emotional damage of growing up in a complicated world.⁵ *EVA*'s success as a coming-of-age story in a perpetually apocalyptic setting inspired the *sekai-kei* genre ("world-type").

Many *sekai-kei* fictions give personal conflicts world-ending stakes. Stevie Suan observes that one defining characteristic of *sekai-kei* is the presence of a love story between an initially self-doubting male protagonist and a secretly powerful female love interest set in a world in crisis.⁶ The young male protagonist is tasked with saving the world, and the key to that is a feminine figure who holds the power to do so. To Suan, *sekai-kei*, as defined by Satoshi Maejima, has a preoccupation with neoliberalism and individualism.⁷ Suan further links the popularity of *EVA*, the progenitor of *sekai-kei*, to the rise of neoliberal attitudes in the 1990s.⁸ "Under neoliberalism," Suan argues, "people are compelled to think of society in terms of the individual, of personal responsibility, where regulation becomes seen as a negative,

³ Susan Jolliffe Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶ Stevie Suan, *Anime's Identity: Performativity and Form beyond Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 241.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

external force upon the individual's freedom."⁹ The contrast between the macro apocalyptic threats and the micro interpersonal conflicts is a crucial aspect of *sekai-kei*, which Suan highlights as the genre's concerns of (male) identity negotiation under neoliberalism and globalization.¹⁰ This contrast parallels the weight of the world with an individual's growing pains by highlighting that the stake of maturation is world salvation. In this sense, *sekai-kei* mirrors the neoliberal configuration of identity that shouldered the responsibility of survival on an individual.

The coming-of-age story format articulates the process of self-perfecting to address a sense of lack. To mature in a world under constant crises is to recognize and address the lack presented by precarious social realities. This process is, of course, gendered because the self is a patriarchal subject, and femininity embodies the lack. The gendered configuration of apocalypse, maturation, and civilization permeates every aspect of the animated franchise and eventually culminates into a giant woman at the end of the world. Though this chapter focuses on the women around *EVA*'s protagonist, Shinji Ikari, I will begin with a provocative sequence without him, which functions as the thesis statement of the series.

Ghostly Mother in the Machine

In Episode 13, *Angel infiltration*, a cosmic threat, Angel, takes the form of a computer virus to infiltrate the last bastion of humanity, NERV. This Angel weakens most of

⁹ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰ Ibid., 260.

NERV's defense system and aims to overtake the Magi supercomputers' central command system. The Magi system is a trio of supercomputers designed by Dr. Naoko Akagi, and the system makes every decision through a unanimous agreement of the trio. The supercomputers are named after the Three Kings, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Naoko died before the story of *EVA*, but her equally capable daughter, Ritsuko, watches over the system. The Angel has taken control of Melchior and Balthasar, leaving Gaspar as the last line of defense. The loss of Gaspar could mean the end of humanity.

Contrasting sharply to the high stakes of the threat, Ritsuko calmly touches a button in a hidden panel, which brings up a giant brain-like machine tucked beneath the command center. She reveals a small tunnel leading to the center of the machine plastered with sticky notes left by her mother. In this imminent crisis, the composed Ritsuko smiles when she spots one of her mother's scribbles that reads "stupid Ikari," possibly referring to her frustration with her lover/colleague, Commander Gendo Ikari. Ritsuko cuts open a skull-like shell to access Gaspar's brain-shaped central system while explaining to her friend Misato that the trio of supercomputers contains the transplanted personalities of her deceased mother. Though named after the Three Kings, the trio represents three parts of Ritsuko's mother: a mother, a scientist, and finally, a woman. Gaspar embodies her womanhood, toward which Ritsuko expresses tender resentment. The alarm screams in despair while Ritsuko silently converses with the "woman" part of her mother through her computer. Finally, Ritsuko convinces Gaspar to overturn the Angel's attack and saves the day. Amid the cheers of

her coworkers, Ritsuko sighs in relief. It is never explained why the woman aspect is critical in saving humanity, but the series implies femininity's innate mysticism and larger-than-life power.

Ritsuko's triumph is not an impressive spectacle but an intimate and almost banal moment. Ritsuko cradles herself inside her mother's "brain," surrounded by her mother's notes (figure 2.1). Her mother is a ghost in a machine that she can never fully understand.



Figure 2.1. Ritsuko reveals a brain-like structure (top left), and a tunnel leading into Gaspar's brain (bottom left), plastered with notes left by Naoko, among which a scribble reads "stupid Ikari" (top right). Ritsuko crouches inside her mother's "brain" (bottom right).

Ritsuko's identity is constructed around her missing mother, and this lack sets isolation as a foundation for her identity formation. Ferdinand de Saussure pictures an uncrossable line between the signifier and the signified. Jacques Lacan reframes this semiotic line to suggest the impossibility of crossing over to reach the Real. Thus, human existence is cursed by the Real's absence, manifested as a lack. This lack ignites a drive to recapture the lost object. Ritsuko is infinitely reminded of her mother by her notes and creations (signifiers), but there is an infinity between Ritsuko and her mother (signified).

In Episode 21, *The Birth of NERV*, we see Ritsuko following her mother's footsteps to become a scientist and devote herself entirely to work. Before her mother's death, Ritsuko discovers her affair with Commander Ikari and resents her for it. Yet, after her death, Ritsuko takes Commander Ikari as a lover, just like her mother. Perhaps this is why she tells Misato that she hates her mother as a woman because she only recognizes her as a woman when she witnesses the affair. The cruel irony is that Ritsuko needs to communicate with her mother as a woman to stop the end of the world.

Ritsuko is closest to understanding herself and her mother when she literally and figuratively sits inside her mother's brain. As a mother figure, Naoko is fragmented, obscure, manifold, and sublimely colossal in terms of the scale and power of the computers and a looming figure in Ritsuko's life. In other words, Naoko's enormity makes her sublime in terms of aesthetic/literary traditions and psychoanalytical

theories. As a ghost in the machine, Naoko foreshadows the femininity of the Evangelion units and the Angels. Naoko's femininity also highlights the conflation between the feminine and the other, a thematic element of *EVA* and a characteristic of psychoanalytic theorizations of lack. Ritsuko's identity is shaped by her mother's absence (lack), and I will follow the mother figures in *EVA* to understand the construction of a patriarchal subject in a precarious world.

First, through Shinji's surrogate mother figure, Misato, I will illustrate how post-postwar Japan textures *EVA*'s fictional landscapes and bodies. Misato's relationship with Shinji illustrates the impossible burden of the prosperity myth for the post-postwar subject. Japan's economic and demographic stagnation began in the 1990s and characterized the era by a lack. The 1990s shattered the sense of stability provided by Japan's postwar recovery. The generational gap between Misato and Shinji differentiates the persevering postwar subject from the precarious post-postwar subject. Secondly, through Shinji's biological mother, Yui, and Evangelion Unit 1 (Eva-01), I will approach Japan's nuclear discourse from the perspective of gender. Nuclearity plays a crucial role in the negotiations of Japan's national identity. Evangelion Units are giant robots with the power to destroy and defend, which makes them an allegory of nuclear arms. By giving most of the units a feminine identity, *EVA* turns them into metaphors of monstrous mothers. Thirdly, I will explore the theme of isolation and precarity plaguing post-postwar Japan through Lilith, the mythical mother figure, and Rei Ayanami, the sublime object. Rei merges with Lilith to become the giant woman in the theatrical remake of the last two episodes of the

original animated series. Lilith/Rei embodies the desire and fear for the other both in the story and for the anime industry. The giant woman became a visual shorthand for calamity, which I will elaborate on in future chapters. This chapter aims to demonstrate the different functions of femininity in *EVA* to expose its patriarchal configurations of power and control.

Surrogate Mother Misato: in the Shadow of the Prosperity Myth

I demonstrated in Chapter 1 that the 1990s was a turning point, which allowed fiction, like *Akira*, to picture Japan as a perpetually apocalyptic space existing between a traumatic past and a precarious future. Director Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) is also a product of this moment. *EVA* tells a story about combating cosmic threats to prevent the world from ending. Depending on the iteration of the story, this group of people come to embrace the calamity with a range of sentiments and rationales. At its heart, *EVA* is a coming-of-age story that illustrates the experience of living in a precarious world. *EVA*'s willingness to play with animation forms and genre conventions makes it groundbreaking. Thomas LaMarre details Anno's ideological and technical interventions to animation by closely examining *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water* and *EVA*.¹¹ LaMarre observes that the two share the high-stake end goal of world salvation realized through smaller-scale problem-solving mediated by human engineering.¹² LaMarre posits that both works

¹¹ Thomas LaMarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 180.

¹² *Ibid.*, 180.

are coming-of-age stories catered to the assumed male audience, but Anno troubles the otaku culture through Shinji in *EVA*.¹³ LaMarre argues that Anno offers Shinji as a portrait of an otaku to critique the arrested development of the fandom.¹⁴

Shinji Ikari, an ordinary teenager, arrives in New Tokyo-3 City to become a pilot of Eva-01. The first episode opens with an uncanny juxtaposition between the ordinary urban landscape and the cosmic threats. Misato welcomes Shinji to the city in the middle of an Angel invasion that sets the tone for the rest of the series. Angels are made ordinary as they are inserted between teenage pilots sitting through lectures at school and staff members chit-chatting at NERV headquarters. *EVA* explains the uncanny banality of the world-ending threats through expositions about the Second Impact.

The Second Impact was an extinction-level event that wiped out most humans before the story of *EVA*. Survivors of the Second Impact learn to live with calamity and cope with the new reality that the world can end at any moment by any means. *EVA* imagines a world that is devastated and continues to be eroded by the Second Impact. This fictional world mirrors aspects of post-postwar Japan. *EVA* brings elements of everyday life in Japan to the series through realistic illustrations of train stations, bus

¹³ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴ Ibid., 180.

stops, and everyday objects like electricity pylons stretching over the city skyline (figure 2.2).

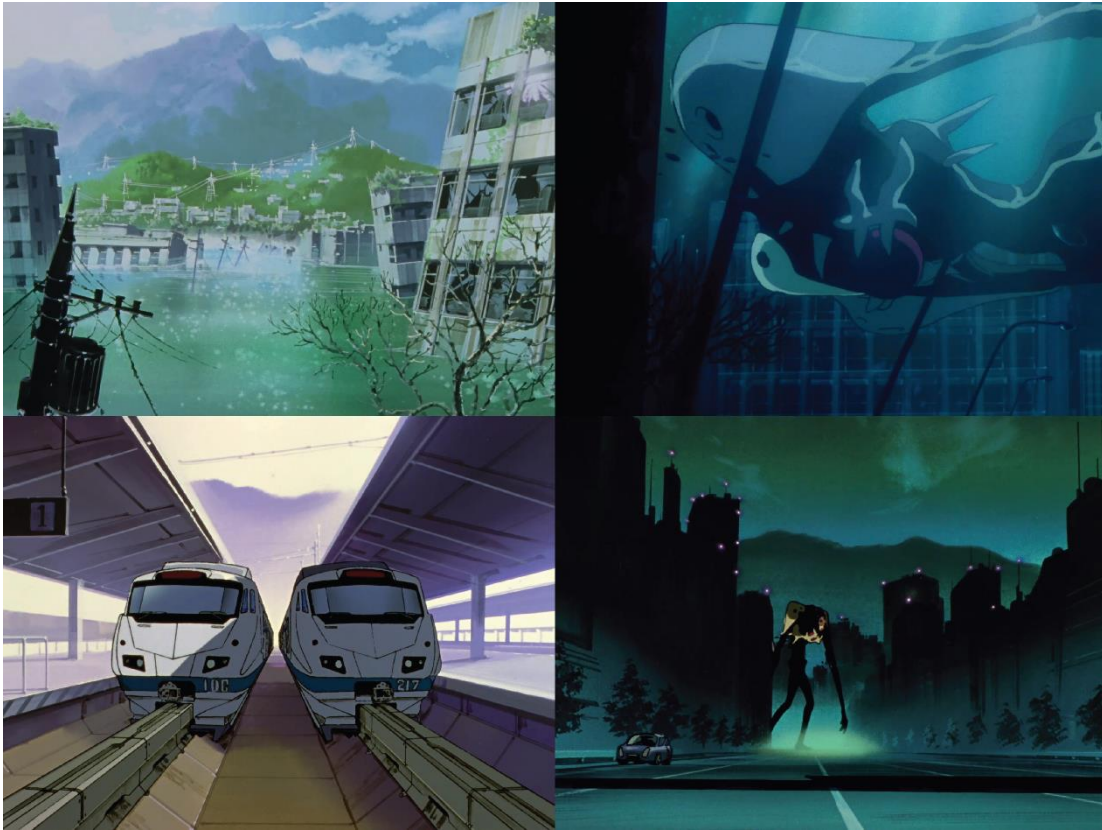


Figure 2.2. Realistic illustrations of everyday spaces and objects (banal) contrast the Angels' sublime scale and visage.

EVA's characters move through a world that looks and feels like the world the audience inhabits, which makes the characters' relationship to the Second Impact legible to the Japanese audience. *EVA* makes the Second Impact an allegory of historical trauma using the visual symmetry between the two precarious worlds.

EVA's cast is divided into three generations, each with a different relationship to the Second Impact. The first generation, led by Shinji's father, Gendo Ikari,

unintentionally instigated the Second Impact for the sake of science. The desire to control larger-than-life power and the power's disastrous eventualities echo the discovery and testing of nuclear bombs. In an interview, Anno said he was influenced by the Cold War when he created the series.¹⁵ Anno notes that he created *EVA* during a period when any societal upheaval seemed capable of triggering exchanges of nuclear warheads between nations.¹⁶ "N-Bombs" make an appearance in a news clipping in Episode 7, where the audience learns that Tokyo was destroyed by bombs and tension between India and Pakistan resulted in nuclear warfare. The first generation lived through the devastation of the Second Impact and created NERV to preserve humanity. They remain largely in the story's background, where the second and third generations are positioned as the main characters, such as Misato Katsuragi and Shinji Ikari.

Misato witnessed the Second Impact because her father took her on the deadly scientific expedition trip that caused the impact. She worked through her trauma and is determined to take control of her loss by becoming the operations director at NERV. Misato's relationship with the Second Impact is also demonstrated through her body. Dennis Redmond lauds Anno's ability to use bodies as sites of nuclear

¹⁵ Alastair Himmer, "Japan's New Anime King Hideaki Anno Haunted by Fears of Nuclear Apocalypse," GMA News Online, October 31, 2014, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/386054/japan-s-new-anime-king-hideaki-anno-haunted-by-fears-of-nuclear-apocalypse/story/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

discourse.¹⁷ Redmond posits that Anno reappropriates the so-called “service shot” to meditate on the trauma of atomic bombings.¹⁸ “Service shot,” or “fan service,” describes images designed to cater to the assumed heterosexual male audience through practices of the male gaze. Redmond observes that Anno uses service shots to call attention to scars on Misato’s body, a bodily reminder of the second impact.¹⁹ Misato’s bubbly personality and studious work ethic evoke the image of Japan’s postwar prosperity myth – a triumph of endurance and perseverance. As Shinji’s surrogate mother, Misato creates expectations for him. Shinji’s struggle to keep up with Misato’s expectations illustrates the shadowy side of living with that triumph. As the primary stand-in for the assumed male audience, Shinji navigates a world that is both ordinary and perpetually in crisis. His journey of self-discovery mirrors Japan’s post-postwar identity, where past trauma remains challenging to metabolize, and future precarity feels overwhelming.

Misato welcomes Shinji to New Tokyo-3 City and dazzles him by showing him the NERV’s underground headquarters, referring to it as the last bastion of humanity. Before Shinji can settle in, he is ordered to pilot Eva-01 by his father, Gendo. Even Misato is astonished by the decision to send Shinji into combat without any training, but all she can do is get him as ready as possible. After winning his first fight, Misato

¹⁷ Dennis Redmond, “Anime and East Asian Culture: Neon Genesis Evangelion,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 2 (2007): 183–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200500486205>, 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

takes Shinji in when she finds out he will be assigned to live in the facility. The relationship between Shinji and Misato (a less-than-ideal mother figure) becomes the first arc of the story as the two lonely people no longer have to say, “I’m home” and “Welcome back” to an empty house. Misato helps Shinji adjust to his role as an Evangelion pilot even though she understands the heavy expectations. In turn, she makes Shinji feel confident in his ability and gives him a sense of stability that was missing in his life. On the one hand, this bond between them feels natural as they are both isolated individuals who find stability in each other. On the other hand, Misato is conscripting Shinji into being a monster-fighting child soldier.

In Episode 2, “The Beast,” Shinji cannot shake the smell from his hand after a close combat with an Angel. As he lies paralyzed, contemplating the ethics of his new profession, Misato quietly complements Shinji. Shinji seems shocked by Misato’s approval, and before Shinji and the audience can linger on the subject further, the screen cuts to black. Shinji’s existential dread grows as the story progresses. He repeatedly attempts to leave but returns because of his bond with Misato. Shinji eventually finds his confidence and sense of self by fully accepting his role as a heroic pilot. Misato, contrastingly, becomes more ambivalent as she feels both proud and guilty about Shinji’s progress. Misato, as a representative of the second generation, embodies the ideal postwar Japanese subject who overcame the crimes and shortcomings of their forefathers. Shinji represents post-postwar Japan, bearing the impossible expectations of the prosperity myth, which is doomed to fail. Misato is a complicated mother figure to Shinji: simultaneously an object of desire and an

unwillingly manipulative figure. Misato and Shinji's relationship is a story of conscription and self-discovery through community building. Shinji's identity constructed in the first arc is essentially a hero's journey, in which a hero goes on an adventure, faces adversities, and comes back transformed. The hero's journey also mirrors the romantic sublime, where a subject transcends by overcoming the sublime. The hero's journey and the romantic sublime are shaped by a preexisting construction of "the feminine," which makes them "an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal subject."²⁰ *EVA*'s first arc ends with Shinji establishing a sense of self, although it is soon challenged as the secrets of another mother figure begin to unravel.

Yui the Monstrous Mother and Eva-01 the Nuclear Monster: Taming the Untamable

A typical cast member of a coming-of-age story is a mother figure. But what if the mother is monstrous? *EVA* presents Shinji's mother as both a ghost in the machine, like Ritsuko's mother, and a nuclear monster as he is part of the mecha Shinji pilots. Nuclearity has been the core of Japan's identity ever since August 1945. Gabrielle Hecht defines it as a signifier for "how places, objects, or hazards get designated as 'nuclear.'"²¹ Scholars such as James Orr and Yoshikuni Igarashi identify the bombs as foundational in the creation of Japan's postwar identity as a victim and a hero.

²⁰ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

²¹ Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (MIT Press, 2012), 4.

Igarashi analyzes how the atomic bombing was framed as not only inevitable but necessary for the rebirth of the nation, which he calls the “foundational narrative.”²² This narrative neatly packaged the onset and end of the Pacific War as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and reduced a complicated history into a moral lesson about an eye for an eye. The reality is, of course, much more complex. For instance, Japan did not surrender solely because of the atomic bombings. It was ultimately motivated by the fear of a Soviet Union’s land invasion.²³ Lisa Yoneyama examines documents on postwar political and diplomatic settlements and claims that they marginalized many victims of Japanese crimes and established the U.S. as an arbiter of peace in the Pacific.²⁴ Certain postwar contextualization of Japan’s wartime involvement, primarily through nuclearity, boiled the complex constellation of a global conflict down to a power struggle between two nations - Japan and the United States.

Nuclearity continues to shape Japan’s identity after the war. At the time of this writing, Japan ranks 4th in the world regarding ownership of functioning nuclear power plants. The once destructive power of the bombs was thus tamed to become a force for good. The scientific optimism would eventually merge with the foundational

²² Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*., 14.

²³ Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Japanese Society Series (Melbourne, Vic: Trans Pacific, 2004), 152.

²⁴ Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374114>, 4.

narrative to pave the way for the implementation of nuclear energy in Japan. As I discussed in Chapter 1, popular culture that reflects the mastery of sublime power can be traced back to Astro Boy or *Tetsuwan Atomu*. This kind-hearted robot runs on atomic energy. Nuclear energy played an important role in postwar Japan's policy: power plants multiplied when other countries began to shy away from nuclear energy after The Three Mile Island and Chernobyl incidents.²⁵ Of course, nuclear energy had its reckoning in 2011 after the Fukushima accident. Nevertheless, despite a positive reception, nuclear power as an untamable monster has always been present in the popular imagination, even as there were attempts to reframe it.

EVA takes the mother as a metaphor in representing an individual's relationship to nuclearity. Given the scope of this chapter, I will primarily focus on Eva-01, which Shinji pilots, and explore the two allegories it offers, one as that of a monstrous mother and the other as a nuclear monster. I illustrated in Chapter 1 that the peace-loving Atomu and the world-destroyer Godzilla express the sublime power of nuclearity. They are different entryways into the same discourse about nuclearity in Japan. *EVA* illustrates nuclearity through the bodies of Evangelion units. For instance, Redmond compares the titanic stature of Godzilla and Evangelion to highlight their different articulations of Japan's postwar identity.²⁶ Redmond posits that Godzilla

²⁵ Kitazawa 120

²⁶ Redmond, "Anime and East Asian Culture.", 186.

represents the fiery destruction of the war, whereas Evangelion is the “stylized version of autonomous, post-American subjectivity.”²⁷

Evangelion units follow the mecha genre’s design conventions. They are coded masculine, from athletic movements to geometric armor plates. Yet these units are given feminine identities. Before the reveal of the Evangelion units’ feminine identity, many characters, especially men, compare the difficulty of controlling the units to women’s emotions. In one episode, a man at a security convention dismisses NERV and Evangelion units by stating that a malfunctioning machine is as useless as a hysterical woman. In a later episode, Misato and her subordinate Makoto Hyuga discuss Eva-01’s recent injury caused by its attempts to protect Shinji. Standing before Eva-01’s bandaged monstrous head, Makoto jokingly says that Eva-01’s unpredictable temperament reminded him of Misato, to which Misato silently protests (figure 2.3).

²⁷ Ibid., 187.

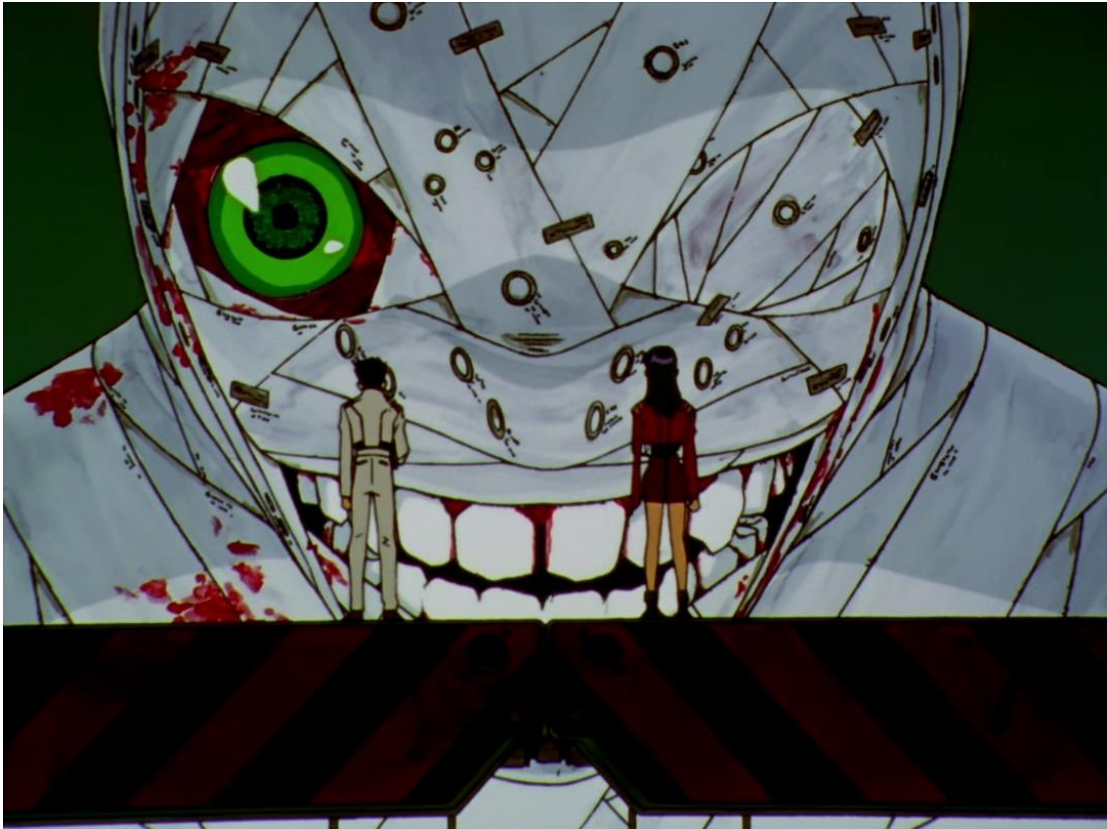


Figure 2.3. Makoto jokingly compares Eva-01's uncontrollable nature to Misato's unpredictable temperament as the two stand before the enormous and bandaged Eva-01.

This interaction aligns Misato, Shinji's mother figure, with Eva-01, hinting at Eva-01's parental relationship to Shinji. As I explained in Chapter 1, the monstrous and the mechanical categorizations are porous, and the human-like face hidden beneath the colorful plating of Eva-01 speaks to the blurry line between the categories. The story later reveals that Eva-01 absorbed Shinji's mother, Yui, during an experiment, which is precisely why he is suited to pilot Eva-01. That experiment became the protocol for future Evangelion units. For example, Asuka Langley Soryu, the other teenage pilot, controls Eva-02, which contains a fragment of her mother's consciousness, specifically, the part of her that makes her a mother.

The masculine visuality of the Evangelion units and the feminine identity give these sublime giants a queer sensibility. The pilot cockpit called the “entry plug,” shaped like a cylinder, is inserted into the nape of the unit. While it is a phallic metaphor for control, the interior visually establishes itself as a womb. As stated earlier, each Evangelion unit contains at least fragments of the young pilot’s mother. When seated inside the entry plug, pilots are submerged and must breathe through the amniotic fluid-like substance called LCL to synchronize with the unit (figure 2.4).

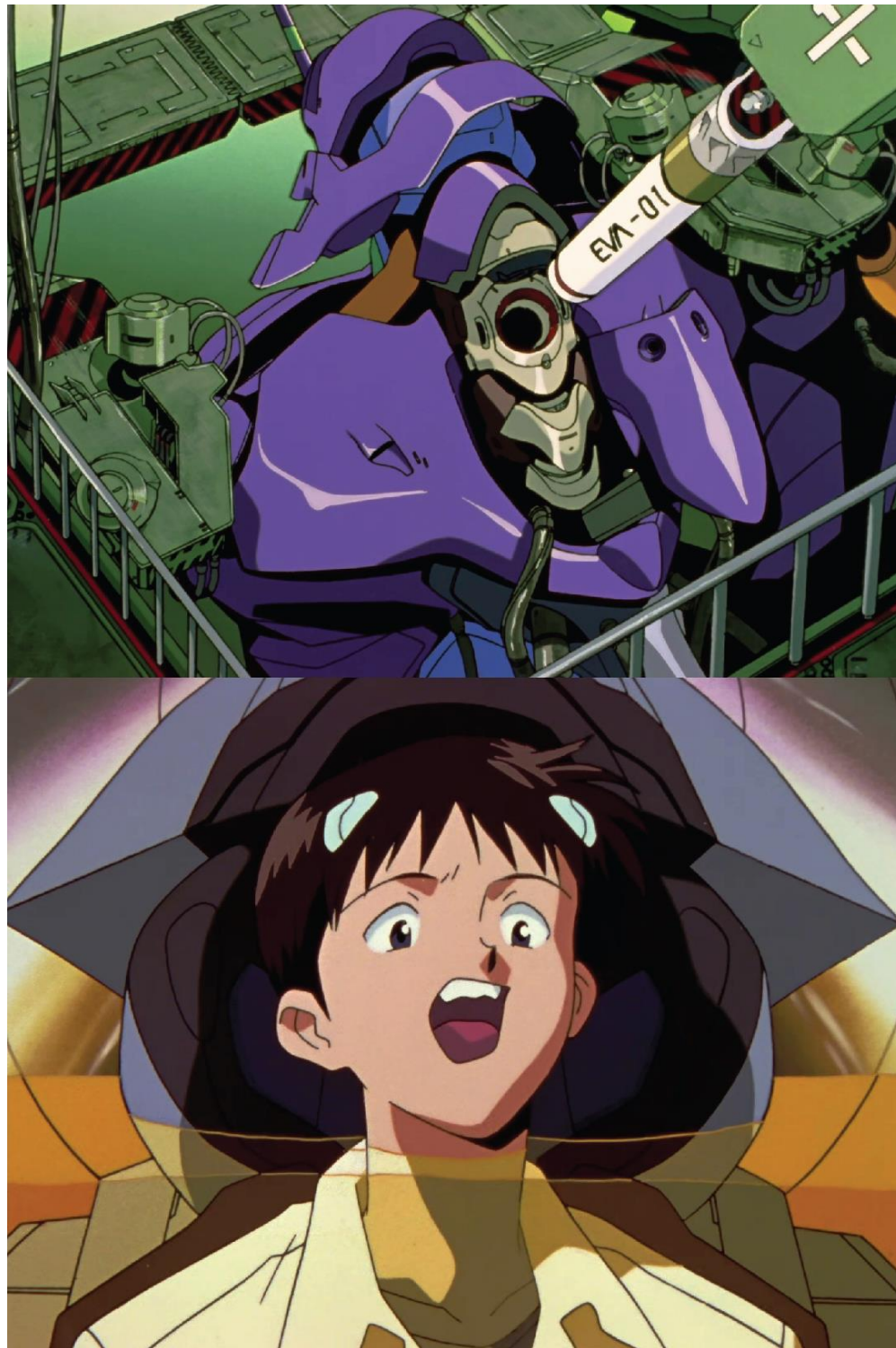


Figure 2.4. (top) the entry plug's phallic-shaped exterior. (bottom) the entry plug's womb-like interior, where Shinji is about to breathe through the amniotic fluid-like substance called LCL.

The psychic synchronization between the unit (mother) and the pilot (child) allows Evangelion units to activate its powerful defensive system known as the Absolute Terror Field, or A.T. Field. A.T.s Fields are invisible and invulnerable barriers. At first, it seems that only Angels and Evangelion units possess this defensive system and the ability to break it. The series later reveals that all living organisms have A.T. Field, like all humans have defense mechanisms. The A.T. Field is a line that separates the self from the other, which allows humans to have individual identities. Therefore, the “absolute terror” of the A.T. Field is the fear of losing one’s identity and the fear of the other. The only place where such a fear does not exist is inside the mother’s womb, where the child does not see its mother as a separate entity. *EVA* turns psychoanalytic theories into mechanical properties of the Evangelion units.

The impenetrable nature of the A.T. Field echoes the uncrossable line between the signifier and the signified, as I discussed earlier. Psychoanalytic theorists Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan reconfigure the semiotic line between the signified and the signifier, proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, into an impenetrable line that separates the self from the other. Freud posits that separation allows one’s ego to form, but it comes with the price of incurable isolation as the child never be one with the mother. Of course, Freud’s conceptualization of isolation has been challenged by different perspectives. One of Freud’s friends, Romain Rolland, uses the “oceanic feeling” to describe the sense of oneness he felt during religious rituals. The “oceanic” signals the sublime quality of the ocean, overwhelming and encompassing. Rolland posits that one can end isolation by becoming one with others through spirituality. In

Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud argues that the oceanic, if it exists, is what a child experiences until breastfeeding ceases. Freud points to the absence of the mother, specifically her breasts, as the onset of one's ego formation. Through this mechanism, *EVA* illustrates Freud's thinking on the oceanic by allowing the child to reunite with the mother and achieve oneness. Through these visual metaphors, *EVA* frames the mecha's body as the mother's body, even though the mother cannot directly communicate with the child and exists as a whisper in a monstrous machine.

Evangelion's monstrosity is made clear as early as Episode 2 when Shinji discovers what lies beneath the armor plates. Eva-01's armor plates are severely damaged during combat and expose its flesh-like body. Eva-01 is not a giant robot, it is manufactured from the same material as the Angels, which are alien organisms. Like Astro Boy, Evangelion units are powerful defensive mechanical entities powered by a destructive force that once terrorized Japan. Evangelion's body, therefore, is a site of nuclear discourse. The masculine-coded armor plates do not offer much protection for the unit. Instead, they behave like control rods in nuclear reactors to prevent a meltdown. *EVA* portrays a moment when Eva-01 breaks free from control in Episode 19. Stevie Suan enacts embodied performance to highlight Eva-01's monstrous agency by examining the sequence in which Eva-01 brutalizes and cannibalizes an Angel.²⁸ The sequence leverages full animation to unsettle the viewer as the audience

²⁸ Ibid., 147

has become accustomed to the limited animation.²⁹ Eva-01 becomes a monster violating the human and non-human division through embodied performance.³⁰ Eva-01's giant and monstrous body is terrifying but demands attention. *EVA* turns Evangelion units' bodies into a site of nuclear discourse through the aesthetics of the sublime. By making the sublime monster a mother figure to Shinji, *EVA* allows Shinji to construct selfhood through gendered configurations of power and control.

The discovery of Evangelion units' monstrous nature unsettles Shinji's sense of self established in the first arc. The "power suit" is not a mechanical apparatus but an amalgamation of his enemy and mother. Evangelion units are walking nuclear power plants, and they are also mother figures. The Romantic sublime no longer applies to the Evangelion units because its otherness is too jarring to be incorporated into the self, which is one of the definitions of the postmodern sublime. Shaw observes that the goal of the postmodern sublime "is to sustain a sense of shock, to prevent the reader/viewer/interpreter from coming to terms with the meaning of that which exceeds the norm."³¹ The postmodern sublime interrogates "the transcendental potential of the sublime by framing the highest high position of the sublime as a mere misperception of reality."³² The body of Eva-01 as a vehicle evokes the Romantic sublime by empowering Shinji to triumph over the sublime threats. Eva-01's identity

²⁹ Ibid., 144.

³⁰ Ibid., 147.

³¹ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Second edition., The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 12.

³² Ibid., 12.

as a monstrous mother challenges Shinji's transcendence by making him question the meaning of his actions and the power he wields.

Mythical Mother as Salvation for Isolation

EVA has consistently positioned the feminine with the sublime, yet the sublime is often associated with the masculine, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1. It is important to note that *EVA*'s feminine coding of the sublime through the mother figures is not intended to subvert the patriarchal belief about power and identity. Rather, *EVA* upholds the sublime's patriarchal configurations of power and control by presenting Shinji, a masculine subject, as a universal subject. While *EVA* showcases the struggles of female characters like Ritsuko, Misato, and Asuka, it prioritizes Shinji's experience, especially in the final two episodes.

The buildup toward the final two episodes is the final arc of *EVA*. The series reveals a secret ploy of a shadowy organization called SEELE that wishes the world to end. Shinji's father, Gendo, is a commander of NERV but also a member of SEELE. SEELE has grown tired of the world in constant crisis, believing that humanity is cursed by isolation. To amend the faulty design of humanity, SEELE concocts a plan called the Human Instrumentality Project, which involves using the power of a mythical Angel called Lilith to merge all humans into one entity so that the world is free of isolation.

EVA reveals that Lilith is the mother of humanity, which makes humans not so different from the Angels. Lilith is a progenitor life form, or a Seed of Life, of an

ancient cosmic race called the First Ancestral Race that seeks out inhabitable planets to settle. Lilith landed on Earth, which resulted in the creation of humans. But before Lilith arrived, another Seed of Life, Adam, was already on Earth. Each Seed of Life travels with a spear that can disable the seed and detect how many seeds are on one planet. Lilith's spear was lost during her travel, so Adam's spear rendered Adam dormant when Lilith landed on Earth. While Adam was stuck in stasis, Lilith's progeny, including humans, populated Earth. The Second Impact was a result of SEELE's attempt to awaken Adam. Adam's offspring are the Angels who seek to take Earth from Lilith's offspring.

As a mother figure of humanity, Lilith evokes images of giant women in creation folklore, such as the ancestral mother Gaia in Greek mythology, Nüwa in Chinese mythology, or various iterations of Mother Nature. *EVA* combines the mythical mother with the psychoanalytic mother to frame her as the cause and solution to isolation. Ortega connects Lilith's mythical status as the "First Woman" and a symbol of corruptive temptation in Judaic and Christian texts to her role in *EVA*.³³ Ortega posits that Lilith's motherly presence allows Shinji to develop his identity.³⁴

³³ Ortega, "My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me," 221.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

Before I delve into *EVA*'s engagement with isolation through the mythical mother, I must contextualize isolation against the backdrop of Japan in the 1990s, that is, the beginning of post-postwar Japan.

The economic downturn in the 1990s might not have been visible to outsiders as Japan was still bathing in the glory of the prosperity myth. Yet, industries and corporations became less stable for job seekers. The precarity brought by the economic downturn also undermined the stable image of the ideal masculine figure, the salaryman, established in the postwar era. "Salaryman" works to provide for his family, came under scrutiny when temporary workers slowly replaced full-time positions at companies. This shift in masculine ideals suggests that the prosperity myth became an unbearable burden for the post-postwar subjects to sustain.

Interestingly, *EVA* represents the salaryman ideal through female characters like Misato and Ritsuko, further highlighting that *EVA*'s considerations of femininity are not rooted in the lived experience of Japanese women. In her ethnographic study of 1980s corporate masculinity, Anne Allison observes that "although a larger proportion of women than ever before are now (in the 1980s) working in salaried jobs outside the home, work is still considered, ideologically and culturally, an activity that is more important for men and that identifies the male more than it does the female."³⁵

³⁵ Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226014883>, 91.

Another threat to the salaryman ideal is the rise of “freeters.” A freeter is a person, most likely male, who has trouble finding permanent employment. In the 1990s, many Japanese companies halted hiring permanent employees, incentivized early retirement, and shifted to a reliance on temporary staff.³⁶ Many job-seeking people could not find permanent positions, which resulted in the rise of freeters. Romit Dasgupta observes that as the increasing number of freeters enter their thirties and forties, they could no longer live up to the expectations the salaryman ideal requires.³⁷ The failure to live up to expectations adds to the sense of precarity and isolation, enhanced further through the rise of neoliberalism. “In neoliberal Japan,” David H. Slater and Patrick W. Galbraith argue, “individuals must be responsible for their own happiness and well-being.”³⁸ Isolation caused by the economic turbulence of the 1990s was only the start of many events and phenomena that installed a sense of precarity in Japan.

In 1995, an earthquake occurred on January 17 in Kobe, Japan, resulting in the death of 6400 people. This catastrophic event shattered people’s sense of security and fundamentally impacted popular imaginations of disaster. Two months after the

³⁶ Gabriella Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan*, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Romit Dasgupta, *Re-Reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities*, Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) East Asian Series (London ; Routledge, 2012) ,82.

³⁸ David Slater and Patrick W. Galbraith, “Re-Narrating Social Class and Masculinity in Neoliberal Japan: An Examination of the Media Coverage of the ‘Akihabara Incident’ of 2008,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, 2011, <https://mail.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2011/SlaterGalbraith.html>.

earthquake, a man-made disaster took place in Tokyo. A cult called Aum Shinrikyō sought to initiate the end of the world by releasing Sarin gas in the center of metropolitan Tokyo. During the morning rush hour peak on March 20th, commuters and station personnel suffered the effects of Sarin. Many victims required immediate medical attention after exposure, which eventually resulted in twelve deaths and 5000 people injured. The Japanese government was slow to react in the aftermath of both events. Robert Jay Lifton notes that Japanese people's "diffuse Aum-related anxiety became part of a larger constellation of fears about earthquakes, economic recession, or depression, weakened family ties, and increasing domestic and social violence."³⁹ The term "lost generation" began to take hold in Japan as broadcast stations like the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, or NHK, and newspapers like the *Asahi Shimbun* reported on the precarious labor reality of younger people working full-time without benefits or security or not working at all and existing as social recluses. 1995's natural and man-made disasters, only two months apart, stridently impacted Japan's perception of itself. From the lost decade to the fabric of societal harmony ripped apart by disasters, Japan entered an era of isolation.

In the face of no seemingly possible solution, we find the mythical mother in *EVA* emerging as a savior figure. NERV uses Adam's spear to render Lilith dormant to conduct experiments, including the Evangelion units and a clone project that involves

³⁹ Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*, First Edition (New York: Picador, 2000), 237.

another teenage pilot, Rei Ayanami. When Misato and Shinji find Lilith in the basement of NERV headquarters, the animation frame positions them directly in front of the enormous white body of Lilith, pierced by a red spear and strung up on a cross like a suffering biblical messiah. This scene's visual language aligns with early conceptions of the sublime, which recognize the irrepresentable and overwhelming as godly or divine. The religious sublime shares properties with the romantic sublime, in which one is confronted by the divine and is given expansive knowledge about the world.

Misato and Shinji soon realize the role of Lilith in their battle against the Angels. Lilith's body is used to produce Rei clones and Evangelion units. LCL, the oxygenated liquid the pilots breathe through inside the entry plug, is Lilith's blood. The discovery of Lilith as the progenitor of Evangelion units borrows from Lilith in Jewish mythology as the mother of demons. Lilith's noncompliance with Adam in Judaic texts is illustrated in *EVA* as the endless battles between Evangelion units and angels, descendants of Adam.

The discovery of Lilith also sheds light on the secret agenda of SEELE. It seeks to solve isolation through the Human Instrumentality Project. The Human Instrumentality project is called the "*Jinrui Hokan Keikaku*" in Japanese. The two characters associated with the term "*hokan*" mean to "amend" and to "complete," which signal a psychoanalytic lack in humans but also gesture towards the sense of isolation in post-postwar Japan. Isolation is represented to be an innate human reality

without any possible solution other than conjuring the mythical mother figure to undo the original cause of isolation, that is, birth.

The last two episodes explore the implementation of the Human Instrumentality Project. Through only contextual clues, the audience can infer that the Third Impact has occurred, which means the project succeeded. Instead of spectacular showdowns between the Evangelion units and the Angels, the series shows Shinji's inner world as he experiences an existential crisis. The last two episodes abandon the series' storytelling method by showing internal monologues of different characters, mainly Shinji, who wrestle with the dichotomy between the self and the other. Sequences from previous episodes, disjointed images, and abstract talking heads intersect the monologues as each character ruminates on the pain of isolation. LaMarre considers the form of limited animation to explain Shinji's existential crisis in the final episode by positing that "Existential crisis is technical crisis, and vice versa."⁴⁰ LaMarre argues that the random-seeming cuts, modulating lines, and shifting styles signal Shinji's collapsing identity.⁴¹ LaMarre defends the series' representations of Shinji's breakdown through the breakdown of animation form (figure 2.5).

⁴⁰ LaMarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*, 182.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

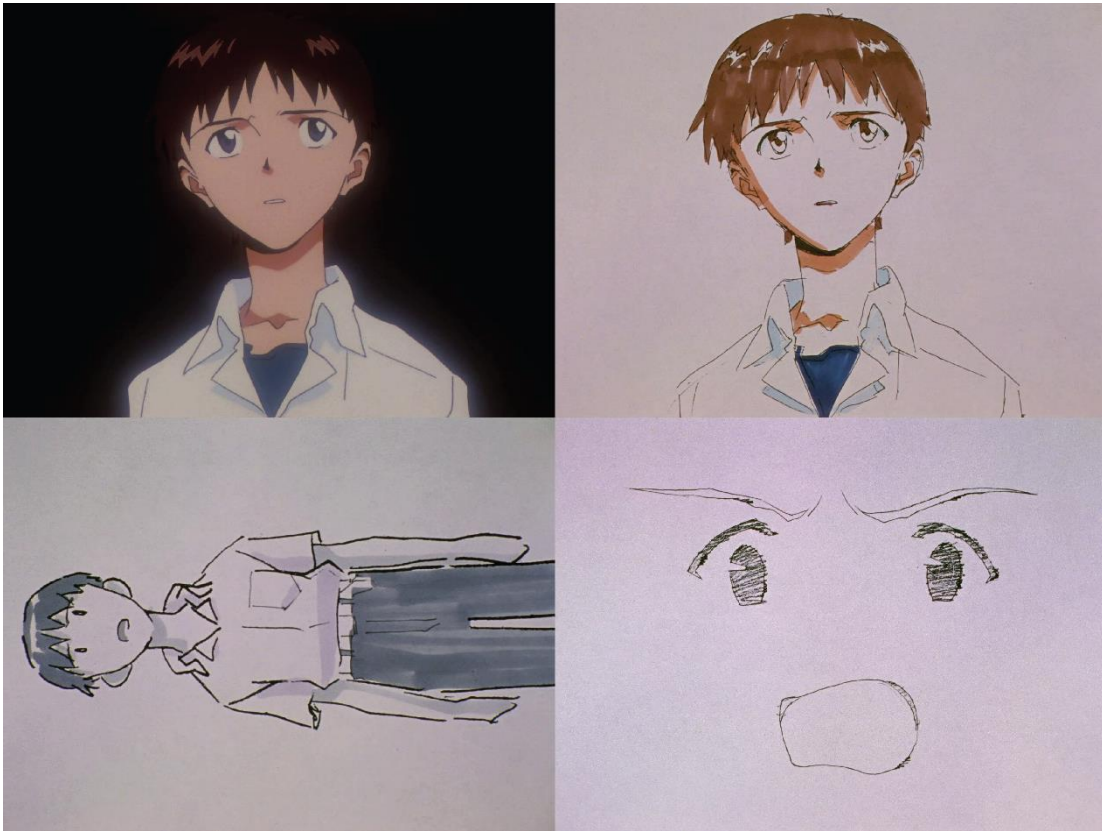


Figure 2.5. Progressive formal breakdown to suggest Shinji's collapsing identity.

After talking with others, Shinji realizes that his life does not need to be defined by others. He does not need recognition to have a sense of self. Shinji's final revelation is welcomed by those Shinji once knew as they congratulate him for becoming one with them all. Like all the other characters, Shinji has been fighting a war doomed to fail. Instead of fighting the inevitable end, they learn to embrace it. As the mother figure and the harbinger of the end, Lilith destroys and remakes the world simultaneously. Napier dwells on the jarring ambiguity of *EVA*'s final two episodes and compares Luke Skywalker's eventual mastery of the "Force" with Shinji's

command over the Evas.⁴² Unlike Luke's joyous completion of the hero's journey, Napier argues that Shinji's mastery of mecha, an allegory of defense mechanism, "leads only to alienation and despair."⁴³ Napier posits that the disappearance of the mecha demonstrates that they are "finally unimportant except as a means to know the self."⁴⁴

This ambivalent ending resonated with the public consciousness of post-postwar Japan wherein catastrophic events repeatedly challenge the once stabilized image of self. The ending's melancholic yet oddly optimistic tone posits that a subject can only self-realize when he (using he here as Shinji is positioned as the universal subject) genuinely connects with those around him. This consideration is gendered because Shinji works through his issue by talking to different women. Even the end of the world is configured as a caring mother who welcomes her child back to her embrace.

Rei the Elevated Mother: The Giant Woman at the End of the World

The ending of the original series was not welcomed with fanfare. After the end of the original run, Anno received letters from fans, some of which included death threats because of the ambiguous ending of the series. Fans wished to learn more about what happened to other characters they cared about, like Rei, Asuka, and Misato. The animation's financial success, the audience's reception, and Anno's reflection on the

⁴² Ibid., 102.

⁴³ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 102.

last two episodes resulted in a series of theatrical releases based on the original series, including a reimagining of the last two episodes.

The End of Evangelion (1997) (EoE) is a retelling of the last two episodes of the original series. The film was bifurcated into two episodes, except each episode had twice the runtime as the TV version. Given the production context of the movie, where Anno is reflecting on his work and its place in popular culture, the film serves as both a return to the original series' theme of isolation and a commentary on fandom culture. A popular discourse emerged around the time of the film's release that saw the changing depictions of Shinji as Anno's "revenge" against those identifying with Shinji. Shinji, in the film, is depicted as a sexually frustrated and misogynistic teenager who objectifies the women around him, whom he deems as all being unsupportive of him. While still acknowledging Shinji's difficult upbringing and the trauma caused by his absent and manipulative father, the film presents Shinji as a helpless individual immobilized by fear and the weight of expectations. He can only do things if he is encouraged by the women around him, but they have become growingly tired of his inaction. In a provocative scene, Shinji is confronted by visions of Asuka, Misato, and Rei all merging as objects of desire to interrogate him. At the same time, he becomes increasingly agitated about their expectations of him. This sequence culminates in a confrontation between Shinji and his ultimate object of desire, Asuka. This sequence is a collection of shots that deliberately highlight the male gaze, where Asuka's body is fragmented into shots of her chest, legs, and buttocks. Shinji's desperation for human connection is contrasted sharply with his

desire for Asuka as a sex object. This confrontation heats up until Shinji chokes Asuka but fails to kill her, while Asuka remarks on Shinji's pathetic nature with a whisper of "disgusting."

There are many ways to interpret the drastically different depictions of Shinji in *EVA* and *EoE*. Kathrine Savoy underscores the series' sexualization of feminine characters and role of women in the male protagonist's identity construction.⁴⁵ Savoy compares the treatment of women in the series with gender inequality in Japan to highlight the series' call for empathy instead of valorizing individual excellence.⁴⁶ Thomas LaMarre observes that Anno intends to criticize the otaku culture by presenting Shinji as an otaku figure. Hiroki Azuma uses *EVA* as an example to theorize database consumption, a crucial otaku culture characteristic.⁴⁷ Database consumptions focus not on the text's grand narrative but on elements and characters that can trigger an affective response. For instance, Rei Ayanami contains elements such as a "quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, mysterious power."⁴⁸ These elements become a shorthand for how Rei makes people feel, which engenders many other characters in other works, professional and fan-made, who have a quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, with mysterious power. The disregard for the grand narrative and the fixation on

⁴⁵ Katherine Savoy, "The Artificial Restoration of Agency through Sex and Technology in Neon Genesis Evangelion," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 14, no. 3 (2014).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, [English ed.]. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

the character might be the catalyst for Anno to illustrate Shinji as a sexist and arrested individual who relies on fiction to escape reality. A more generative take comes from Stevie Suan. Suan focuses on anime's performance as a form to explore the performance of selfhood in the series.⁴⁹ Extending several definitions of theatrical performances to animation, Suan examines varying modes of constructions of selfhood in *EVA* and *EoE*.⁵⁰ Suan views Rei as an object "without agency and to be acted upon" to define his conceptions of objecthood: "A copy, somehow not human, and built through the repetition of codes to constitute a reserved personality."⁵¹ Rei is a collection of traits curated from others but sometimes acts according to her volition. Suan uses Rei's dichotomy to propose the performance of objecthood through figurative acting.⁵² Suan's perspective reconfigures Rei as an agential object that challenges Shinji's selfhood.

Rei also operates as a sublime object. I detailed the sublime object, or object of desire, in Chapter 1, but I will reiterate some of its definitions. Žižek posits that "a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he (Lacan) calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of

⁴⁹ Stevie Suan, "Objecthood at the End of the World: Anime's Acting and Its Ecological Stakes in Neon Genesis Evangelion," in *Anime Studies: Media-Specific Approaches to Neon Genesis Evangelion*, ed. José Andrés Santiago Iglesias and Ana Soler-Baena (Stockholm University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.16993/bbp>, 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 155.

desire.”⁵³ The sublime object presents itself as the ultimate solution to lack. It feels like the closest thing that can fill the unfillable void within us. In the context of *EVA*, Rei is a sublime object for the otaku fandom, as illustrated by earlier studies. Rei is also a sublime object for the characters in *EVA* and *EoE*.

Throughout the original run of the series, Rei is at times a mystery, at times an empty figure yet always serving as a foil to characters around her. Characters like Asuka and Shinji read Rei’s lack of emotions as evincing a maturity they do not possess, while Ritsuko’s mother murders one of the Rei clones out of envy and self-hatred. Rei embodies the lack in others because she is a collection of desirable traits, as Suan and Azuma observe in their respective works. Other characters’ interactions with her, primarily through her body, are highly fetishistic. Throughout the series, characters, including Shinji, Gendo, and Asuka, embrace or commit violence against Rei’s bodies, to which she seldom reacts. They project their desires and fears onto her because she reminds them of who they are not or who they have lost. Rei was created in the image of Shinji’s mother and Gendo’s wife, Yui. As a replacement for Yui, Rei arguably is a sublime object that can address Gendo’s and Shinji’s pain of losing Yui.

Rei is also Lilith, the mythical mother with sublime authority over life and death.

Built from Lilith’s flesh and blood, Rei’s body is objectified as a vessel of technological ingenuity, spiritual revelation, and sexual desire. As a clone, she is

⁵³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition (London New York: Verso, 2009), 221.

multiple, malleable, but also dangerous. Rei is a sublime object, the ultimate object of desire, and a manifestation of the overwhelming sublime. The final sequence of *EoE* explores the duality of Lilith/Rei.

Instead of focusing on the inner world of Shinji, we find out the catastrophic results of the Human Instrumentality Project. Rei refuses to cooperate with Gendo and merges with Lilith. Free from the bind of the spear, Lilith takes on Rei's appearance and begins to expand herself. Lilith/Rei rises from the depths of NERV headquarters, and visions of Rei appear in front of other characters. She shapeshifts into who they most desire or fear. For some, she takes on the appearance of an unrequited love interest. For others, she is a monster (figure 2.6).



Figure 2.6. Rei shapeshifts to embody other's desires and fears.

Lilith/Rei presents herself as the ultimate solution to isolation, or lack, eroding people's defense system or the A.T. Field. There is no more division between self and other. Without their A.T. Field, people dissolve into one, into the oceanic, illustrated as people turning into LCL. In *EoE's* final moments, we see Lilith/Rei becoming a

giant figure towering over Earth while merging all souls. The world is simultaneously destroyed and remade.

In contrast to the original series, the film offers an alternative ending. Unlike his decision in *EVA*, Shinji decides that he would like to reinstall the line between the self and the other. Lilith/Rei answers Shinji by returning him to his body and giving him his object of desire, Asuka. On the beach of a postapocalyptic world, Shinji and Asuka are now the Adam and Eve of a new world. Instead of reflecting on the human condition, Shinji immediately hops onto Asuka's body and begins to choke her. Failing again and crying, Asuka gently caresses his face and whispers, "How disgusting." The ending shows Shinji's failure to escape isolation even if the world offers everything.

EoE comments on masculinity through Shinji's interactions with femininity. While Asuka, Misato, and even Rei are a part of this world, the world does not organize around them. The final image of the giant woman at the end of the world serves as a sublime figure for the patriarchal subject to confront. Through different conceptualizations of the sublime, the giant woman embodies varying degrees of patriarchal articulations of power, desire, and control. In front of the sublime image is a patriarchal subject who meditates on the meaning of life in a precarious world. We will find this motif of the giant woman repeatedly in fictional worlds that are perpetually apocalyptic. By highlighting the role of gender in perpetually

apocalyptic fiction, I wish to dismantle patriarchal assumptions about civilization, identity, and apocalypse.

CHAPTER 3: Traumatic Femininity

In 1997, the same year as the release of *the End of Evangelion*, a Japanese game development studio Square Enix, formally known as Square, released *Final Fantasy VII* (*FFVII*) under the direction of Yoshinori Kitase. Players assume control of a young man with blond hair equipped with a giant sword who joins a group of environmental activists to restore the planet to its former glory. As the seventh entry of the franchise, the game plays similarly to its predecessors. Players navigate a world plagued by corporate greed while combating monsters and enemies, leading to final confrontations with God-like entities.

FFVII was an instant domestic success, and as it gained global popularity, it became a seminal work in the history of video games. Despite its medium difference from *EVA*, *FFVII* also pictures a world in constant crisis. In addition to a giant woman appearing as a harbinger of calamity, a corporation that carelessly saps the planet for its resources poses a world-ending threat. *FFVII* is a coming-of-age story, even though the main cast includes adults in their 20s and early 30s. However, Cloud Strife, the player's avatar, suffers from memory loss, allowing players to construct Cloud's identity as they navigate the perpetually apocalyptic world. Cloud's identity construction turns masculinity into a process and, in its execution, turns femininity into a metaphor for the other.

FFVII's most pronounced feminine presence (and later absence) is Aerith Gainsborough, a kindhearted flower girl who secretly holds the power to heal the

planet. To talk about Aerith is to talk about the impact and legacy of her death. As a magic user proficient in healing, Aerith is frequently in many players' parties during their early adventures. Her caring demeanor and beautiful character design make her an endearing figure to the cast and the players. *FFVII*'s original release requires players to switch between three discs due to the hardware limitations of the early game consoles. As a result, the three-disc format arguably gives the story a three-act structure. Aerith's journey concludes with disc 1 when the primary antagonist, Sephiroth, kills her as she performs the ritual to heal the planet. I will elaborate on the function of her death in my later analysis, but I want to stress the continuous impact of this moment.

In addition to its shocking nature, Aerith's death heavily burdens the cast and the players who have invested in her. Players must carry on with the story without her in the remaining discs, and her painful absence sets the protagonist and the player on a journey of self-discovery. Through death, Aerith becomes one of the most influential video game characters.

Two decades after the initial release, Square Enix redesigned the original game according to contemporary game design standards and gave it a new name, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020). One of the trailers shows a beautifully rendered cutscene in which Aerith holds a yellow flower to the screen (figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1. Aerith handing a yellow flower to Cloud in a Teaser Trailer released in 2019.

Cloud and Aerith’s short exchange immediately conjures the players’ memory of the flower girl. This is a reunion, another chance to go on the journey with Aerith. Game journalist Mike Fahey published a touching opinion piece on the upcoming *Final Fantasy VII Remake* that details the pain of losing Aerith during his first playthrough. Fahey remarks that despite the “goofy looking” character models, the death scene is still saddening.¹ Aerith’s death left a lasting impression on many players like Fahey. Intrigued by Fahey’s article, Journalist Lina Misitzis of *This American Life* interviewed him about why he found her death so compelling. Fahey and Misitzis first discussed Aerith’s somewhat lackluster characterization before her death.² They

¹ Mike Fahey, “I Can’t Go Through This Again, Final Fantasy VII,” Kotaku, May 13, 2019, <https://kotaku.com/i-can-t-go-through-this-again-final-fantasy-7-remake-1834721916>.

² Lina Misitzis and Ira Glass, “Save the Girl: Prologue,” *This American Life*, accessed January 6, 2024, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/679/save-the-girl>.

contemplated the alternative possibility that Aerith's death might not be as impactful if the game gives the role to an annoying younger brother-like character.³ The short segment ends with both journalists acknowledging the impact of Aerith's death while hoping for a more well-developed characterization in the remake. The interview recognizes Aerith's insufficient character writing but fails to consider the material consequence of her death. Writer Nathan Randall reflects on the finality of Aerith's death and argues that,

When she dies, her ultimate weapon disappears; you can't use her limit break. And your most powerful magic user is nowhere to be found. You spend the rest of the game astounded at the acute absence of a playable character and one of Cloud's closest friends. The game doesn't just tell you that there is loss—the game makes you feel loss. When she dies, your ability to act in the game world decreases. Not only does Cloud express to you his grief, you're led to really feel it.⁴

When Cloud mourns the loss of Aerith, the players also experience loss as the game suddenly changes in front of their eyes. In many ways, the players navigate the world with the same grief and loss that paralyzed Cloud in the story. Aerith's death has engendered a wide range of discussions, from the treatment of women in games to the narrative function of death. As a narrative device, Aerith's death fits the descriptions of "Women in Refrigerators" (WiR). Coined by comic writer Gail Simone, WiR is a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nathan Randall, "'Aerith Is Gone': Perma-Death in Games," *With A Terrible Fate*, May 23, 2015, <https://withaterriblefate.com/2015/05/23/aerith-is-gone-perma-death-in-games/>.

literary trope commonly found in American comics. A feminine character is depowered, traumatized, or killed to advance a masculine character's narrative.⁵

Coming-of-age stories cannot represent universal experiences because they are built on patriarchal beliefs about power and control that traffic in assumptions about sexual differences. Death as a catalyst for the protagonist exists across mediums and literary traditions from Greek mythologies to Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey." A commonality of these traditions is the default masculinity of the subject who mourns the death of a significant other. The loss of innocence, protection, and nurturing sets the protagonist on a path of maturity. Both feminine and masculine-coded characters can serve the role of the "lost other," but the protagonist is more likely to be coded masculine. Joseph Campbell famously defended his thoughts on women by arguing that "the woman's the mother of the hero; she's the goal of the hero's achieving; she's the protectress of the hero; she is this, she is that. What more do you want?"⁶ But who is she if she is no longer beholden to the hero?

The patriarchal undertone of the hero's journey mirrors that of the Romantic sublime. As I stated in the first chapter, the Romantic sublime is implicitly masculine. In this chapter, I will describe how the beautiful, often configured as the opposite of the sublime, formulates masculinity through its absence. Phillip Shaw traces different

⁵ Gail Simone, "Women in Refrigerators," accessed January 6, 2024, <https://www.lby3.com/wir/>.

⁶ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*, 1st New World Library ed., The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell (Novato, Calif: New World Library, 2003), 93.

theorists' conceptions of the two terms and observes that "the sublime is greater than the beautiful; the sublime is dark, profound, and overwhelming and implicitly masculine, whereas the beautiful is light, fleeting, and charming and implicitly feminine."⁷ The dichotomy between the beautiful and the sublime allows me to examine the metaphoric functions of two feminine figures, Aerith and Jenova.

Aerith is the last survivor of an Indigenous community known as the Cetra, who holds the power to restore the planet. Jenova is an alien threat that crashed and landed on the planet two thousand years ago and went on to wipe out most of the Cetra. Shinra, the greedy corporation serving as the primary antagonist, uses Jenova's cell to create super soldiers, SOLDIER, to colonize the planet and abuse its magical resource, Mako. Mako is the planet's spiritual energy and contains the collective consciousness of all creatures, including the Cetra people. As a representative of the Indigenous community, Aerith signifies the beautiful, whereas Jenova, as the alien monstrous mother, poses a sublime threat to the world. *FFVII*'s fictional landscapes ruminate on the dichotomy between the two, most evident in the design of the North Crater. The North Crater is a staggering landmark on *FFVII*'s world map (figure 3.2).

⁷ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Second edition., The New Critical Idiom (London; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 12.

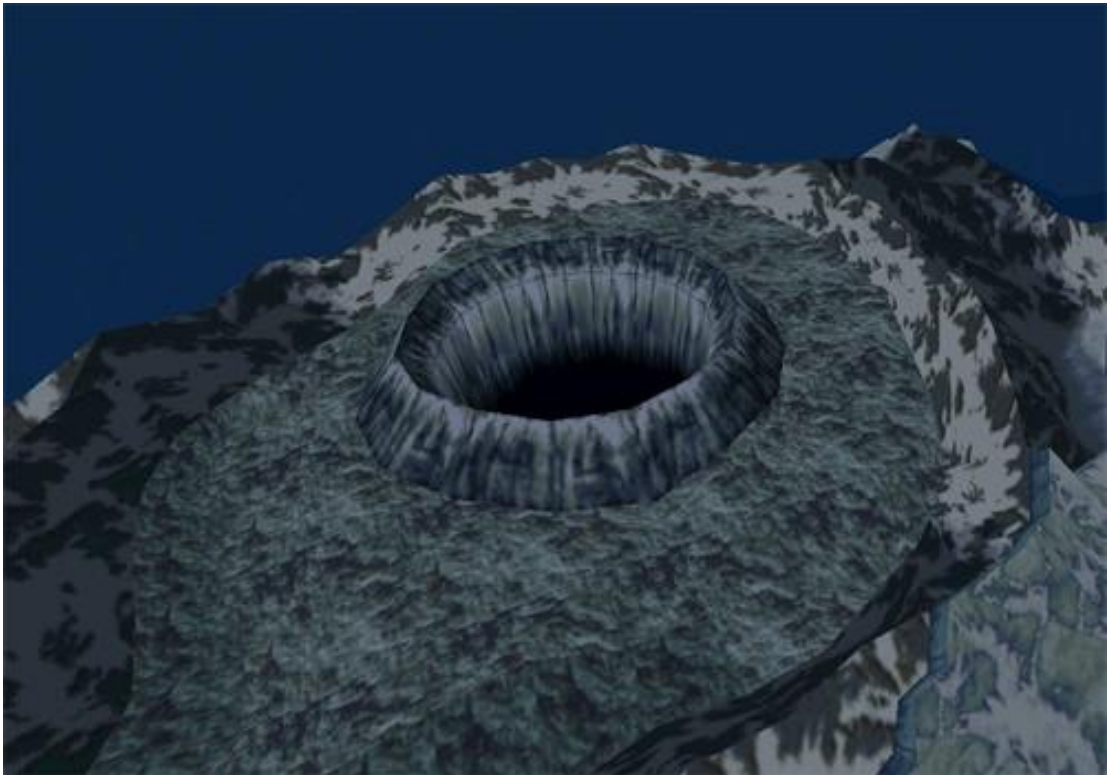


Figure 3.2. The North Crater, created by Jenova’s impact upon the planet.⁸

As a result of Jenova’s initial impact, the North Crater is a literal and figurative wound that persistently threatens the planet. The lifestream, containing the Cetra people’s ancestral knowledge, converges at the North Crater to slowly heal the planet’s trauma. The North Crater is the final confrontation between the protagonist, Cloud, and the antagonist, Sephiroth, who attempts to instigate a cataclysmic event. *FFVII* uses Aerith and Jenova, representatives of the beautiful and the sublime, to meditate on the meaning of life through Cloud’s journey, punctuated by meditations on Japan’s changing definitions of masculinity since WWII and to the precarious post-postwar

⁸ Captured by “JBed,” uploaded to https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/North_Crater.

era. In short, this chapter examines *FFVII* as a post-postwar text and contemplates the role of femininity in constructing masculinity.

Post-postwar versus Postcolonial

The discourse around the atomic bombings played a crucial role in bifurcating wartime and postwar Japan. Yoshikuni Igarashi coins the "foundational narrative" to describe a much-embraced rationale for the bombings that sees them as a necessary evil to bring peace and modernity to Japan.⁹ Through collective trauma, Japan emerged from the ashes of wartime trauma and united its subjects with an agenda for peace. Postcolonial theorist Ranjana Khanna uses "melancholia" to talk about the role of collective trauma in cultivating postcolonial subjects. Khanna posits that, unlike mourning, melancholia signals the refusal or inability to mourn.¹⁰ Because collective trauma is often associated with specific institutionalized versions of understandings, like the "foundational narrative," Khanna's postcolonial melancholy creates a space for alternative relationships with one's cultural memory.

FFVII is a post-postwar text that inhabits the melancholic space to reflect Japan's changing modernity since the war through gendered metaphors. Briefly discussed in Chapter 1, gender plays an essential role in the changing definition of Japan. Igarashi observes that popular fiction during wartime often casts Japan in the dominant

⁹ Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: University Press, 2000), 37.

¹⁰ Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 22.

masculine role in its relations with its Asian colonies.¹¹ Japan's later defeat and occupation rendered Japan feminine, with the United States taking over the masculine role in postwar narratives.¹² The signings of the Treaty of Peace with Japan in 1951 and the Japan–U.S. Mutual Security Treaty in 1952 further enhanced the gendered power dynamic between the two nations as the U.S. became the (masculine) protector of the demilitarized (feminized) Japan. Reading Japan's postwar recovery through gendered configurations of power, I want to highlight the process of defining and redefining masculinity by acting on feminine weakness.

I argue that Cloud and Sephiroth represent postwar and wartime masculinity. Additionally, as the cosmic threat, Jenova provides an opportunity for transcendence, and Aerith, the embodiment of the beautiful, bears the traumatic consequence of weakness. Many Japanese writers and thinkers reimagined the nation-state as a traumatized yet enduring feminine figure through narratives of the atomic bombings and the victimization of Japanese women during the occupation era. Femininity, thus, becomes an access point for emotions. The feminine body becomes a site where emotion is easily channeled through, reflected upon, and crystallized into mobilization. In a text that deals with two confronting ideals of masculinity, a feminine body can effectively evoke the correct emotional response towards different masculine ideals.

¹¹ Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

To understand *FFVII*, we must consider video games as a medium for postcolonial considerations and a specific postcolonial framework applicable to Japan, especially considering Japan's double roles as the victim and victimizer. David Stahl and Mark Williams identify a considerable number of Japanese popular media that meditate on Japan's wartime trauma. Notably, Stahl uses Isao Takahata's animated film *Graves of the Fireflies* (1988) to explore how the film, by representing history through fiction, acts out, works over, and works through Japan's wartime trauma.¹³ Fiction offers a provocative space for conveying unmetabolized and irrepresentable trauma. Studies on trauma first became popular during the First World War when understandings of trauma shifted from "corporeal to psychic wound."¹⁴ That said, it is crucial to differentiate trauma theory from modern psychology. Where modern psychology seeks to relieve the pain caused by post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma theory engages with trauma via a barrage of metaphors and allegories. Trauma narrative's emphasis on unpacking the effects of war and colonization resonates with postcolonialism, a branch of cultural studies that combines psychoanalysis with cultural analysis.

¹³ David C. Stahl and Mark Williams, *Imag(in)Ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film*, Brill's Japanese Studies Library; v. 34 (Leiden; Brill, 2010), 177.

¹⁴ Karolyn Steffens, "Modernity as the Cultural Crucible of Trauma," in *Trauma and Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316817155.004>, 37.

A postcolonial frame uncovers colonial tendencies tucked beneath game systems and unveils seemingly innocuous metaphors derived from geopolitical conflicts. Souvik Mukherjee proposes postcolonialism as an imperative intervention to the studies of video games.¹⁵ The goal of Mukherjee's intervention, pointed out by Soraya Murray, is to address "the popular depoliticization of video games."¹⁶ While many studies offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives on *FFVII*, the game is not commonly placed within its cultural backdrop. Many Japanese video games are textured by postcolonial and postwar considerations and presented as universal experiences. Rachael Hutchinson has written extensively about the role of nuclear power in game designer Hideo Kojima's oeuvre, especially the *Metal Gear Solid* series. She notes that the series recontextualizes Japan's wartime trauma through metaphors to create "a record of that history" without direct references.¹⁷ Similarly, Ryan Scheiding looks at another video game auteur Shinji Mikami's atomic references in games such as *Resident Evil* and *Dino Crisis*. Connecting video games to *hibakusha* literature and cultural memory of the atomic bombings, Scheiding posits that Mikami leverages the video game medium to render "horrific pasts as allegorical playable experiences."¹⁸

¹⁵ Souvik Mukherjee, "Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2018): 504–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015627258>, 518.

¹⁶ Soraya Murray, "The Work of Postcolonial Game Studies in the Play of Culture," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.285>.

¹⁷ Rachael Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 17.

¹⁸ Ryan Scheiding, "'The Father of Survival Horror': Shinji Mikami, Procedural Rhetoric, and the Collective/Cultural Memory of the Atomic Bombs," *Loading* 12, no. 20 (2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065894ar>, 12.

Likewise, I shall employ similar tactics to tease out postcolonial/postwar considerations in *FFVII*. Postcolonial discourse permeates every aspect of the game, most directly through the character Yuffie Kisaragi. Through Yuffie, we learn about the defeat of her homeland, Wutai, in a war with Shinra Electric Power Company, the primary antagonist force of the story. Wutai is a demilitarized state, subjugated by Shinra, whose martial arts facilities have become tourist destinations. The demilitarized Wutai mirrors postwar Japan that relies on other means to recover from its material devastation. Despite its defeat, Wutai refuses to construct Shinra's Mako reactors, an allegory of nuclear reactors. However, the lack of Mako energy leads to Wutai's economic decline and further reliance on tourism. Ranajit Guha posits that colonial power does not require cultural hegemony to dominate in his book *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Guha notes that capitalism's universalizing power persuades colonized elites to uphold the standards created by the colonizer even after colonization.¹⁹ The colonizer continues to exert power over the postcolonial subject by recruiting the colonized other into a capitalist system. *FFVII*'s Wutai is a postcolonial state, and Yuffie's experience speaks to the struggles of the postcolonial subject.

If the player decides to obtain an optional weapon for Yuffie by visiting her hometown, they will stumble upon a postcolonial reflection. The player must control

¹⁹ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Convergences (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.

Yuffie to defeat five skilled fighters inside Wutai Pagoda, including Yuffie's father, Godo. Rather than celebrating the success of the brutal combats, Yuffie confronts her father after defeating him.

Yuffie: You turned Wutai into a cheesy resort town peddling to tourists. How dare you!? Da-chao Statue and Leviathan are ashamed!!

Godo: Forgive me. It's all my fault. I am the same now as I was before when I wanted the war. But, after I lost the war, I began to think. Is strength only for defeating the enemy? or just something to show-off to others?... Strength without determination means nothing. And determination without strength is equally useless!

Yuffie's anger towards the self-orientalization of her culture speaks to her postcolonial subjectivity. *FFVII* further comments on orientalization, regardless of intentionality, through the mixed use of Asian cultural signifiers. Wutai is a chimera of East Asian cultures – its architecture and writing system seem to take inspiration from China, Korea, and Japan. Interestingly, it is through this amalgamation of Asian identities we see Japan aligning with its colonized others. Given Wutai's demilitarization, tourist development, and concerns over nuclear power, one can position Wutai with Japan, which makes Shinra, a capitalist corporatocracy, an allegory of the United States. The alignment is imperfect because Japan was never officially colonized, but through Wutai, *FFVII* welcomes meditations on colonization and defeat.

Another postcolonial figure is Nanaki, or Red XIII, a beast-like creature and a recruitable party member. Researchers at Shinra captured Nanaki to experiment on him. As a wolf-like beast with tribal tattoos and feathery headdresses, Nanaki summons stereotypical imaginations of Indigenous communities in North America,

especially the noble savage coding.²⁰ Nanaki's mission to overturn Shinra and protect the planet makes him another example of a postcolonial subject. The final ending sequence of the game shows Nanaki with cubs roaming the posthuman world and looking over the ruins of Midgar, where Shinra is located. Vegetation and animals have reclaimed the space once occupied by people five hundred years after the meteor impact that destroyed Shinra.

The final postcolonial figure is Aerith. Aerith is also an allegory of postwar Japan, melancholic yet perseverant. *FFVII* uses indigeneity to conjure an idealistic nostalgia for a past that never was. This nostalgia is mobilized to critique industrialization and a flavor of colonialism exhibited by the Shinra corporation. Like Nanaki, Aerith is associated with the image of plants reclaiming ruins of civilization. *FFVII* first introduces Aerith as the flower girl selling flowers in the concrete jungle of Midgar. Shinra's reactors have turned the land barren, so her power to grow flowers makes Aerith unique. The party can later locate Aerith in an abandoned church and her home in the undercity slum – Sector 5. Aerith grows flowers by channeling her spiritual power, making these two locations rare sights of life in Midgar. Juxtaposed against the cool-toned machinery and metal pipes, Aerith's out-of-place flowers signal what

²⁰ Jason C. Cash, "Introduction: Let's Mosey," in *The World of Final Fantasy VII: Essays on the Game and Its Legacy*, ed. Jason C. Cash and Craig T. Olsen (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2023), 1–9, 5.

the world used to be and can become again. Like her flowers, Aerith perseveres in the slum and flourishes despite her trauma.

FFVII paints significant events of stories and the fictional landscape with cultural memories of Japan's involvement during and after WWII. The brushstrokes are careful enough that they appear universal but striking enough that can elicit similar emotional responses to memories of the war. *FFVII*'s culturally ambiguous worldbuilding is an intentional strategy. Koichi Iwabuchi developed two concepts, "hybridity" and "mukokuseki" (English: no nationality), to describe two practices commonly found in Japanese popular culture.²¹ Mukokuseki refers to removing less marketable cultural traits during production, whereas hybridity incorporates recognizable foreign elements to make the product legible globally.²² Iwabuchi posits that such strategies were the results of transnationalism and postcolonialism due to Japan's double positions as both the victim and victimizer during WWII.²³ By erasing obvious Japanese signifiers and appropriating identifiable outside cultural signifiers, Japanese media can enter the global market as a likable cultural form without any historical baggage. *FFVII* operates both mukokuseki and hybridity in its worldbuilding. For instance, Aerith's religiosity takes inspiration from several belief systems, and Wutai is an amalgamation of East Asian cultural elements.

²¹ Kōichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002), 53.

²² *Ibid.*, 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 53.

Bringing back Mukherjee and Murray's considerations of postcolonial interventions in game studies, I argue games that are created to be globally appealing through practices of selective representations sustain the myth that games are apolitical. On the one hand, these ambiguous representations break down cultural barriers so that players from diverse backgrounds can enjoy the game. On the other hand, mukokuseki and hybridity do not offer a full spectrum view of Japan's complicated involvement during and after WWII because of the practices' aversion to Japan's undesirable qualities. Given Japan's role during and after WWII, I propose "postwar" as a replacement for "postcolonial" in my examination of *FFVII*.

Mutable Masculine Icons

FFVII presents various postwar reflections through its characters and worldbuilding. To narrow the scope, I will primarily focus on its definition of the "ideal self," illustrated through Cloud and Sephiroth. As Shinra's super soldier, Sephiroth is the ultimate expression of strength and violence. Sephiroth's role as the series' primary antagonist makes him the foil to Cloud. Cloud's confrontations with Sephiroth are a series of contemplations over the shifting definitions of masculinity. Sephiroth represents the wartime masculine ideal, whereas Cloud attempts to redefine masculinity in the postwar context. Suffering from memory loss, Cloud experiences several episodes of identity crises throughout the story, which conveniently work through different definitions of what it means to be a man. Cloud's goal of becoming the "real" version of himself is the central theme of these explorations. I believe the

"real" Cloud is *FFVII*'s thesis on masculinity, and its gameplay maps the path toward Japan's postwar masculine ideal.

The desired masculine performance evolves according to the era. For instance, the gentleman was one of the ideal masculine archetypes in the Meiji era (1868 – 1912). The Meiji Restoration heralded rapid industrialization in Japan by adopting Western ideologies and means of production. Donald Roden traces different negotiations of the cultivated gentleman to demonstrate anxieties around the cultural shift from the Edo period to Meiji.²⁴ Roden posits that the gentleman is a “cultivated ideal” designed to be a pedagogical icon for the nation-state subject.²⁵ As a template, the cultivated gentleman outlines the performative acts required to be a man. The instructional nature of the gentleman makes masculinity a project. Therefore, one can only achieve masculine ideals through discipline and cultivation.

Michele M. Mason, through the figure of the *bushi* (warrior), skillfully demonstrates that a bygone masculine archetype can be mobilized to construct parameters of new masculine ideals.²⁶ Mason expands on the “bushidō boom” that emerged during the turn of the twenty-first century, or post-postwar, to explore the sense of precarity

²⁴ Donald Roden, “Thoughts on the Early Meiji Gentleman,” in *Gendering Modern Japanese History*, ed. Barbara Molony and Kathleen S. Uno, Harvard East Asian Monographs 251 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 61–98, 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁶ Michele M. Mason, “Empowering the Would-Be Warrior: Bushidō and the Gendered Bodies of the Japanese Nation,” in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall, Asia: Local Studies / Global Themes (Berkeley, [Calif.]; University of California Press, 2011), 68–90, 68.

brought by reflections on Japan's past and future.²⁷ Mason, like Roden, sees masculinity as a project and extends the performative acts to the discipline of the body. Mason highlights the conflation between metaphors of the national and individual bodies by observing that "unfavorable habits or weakness in individual bodies serve as the barometer of decline or crisis in the national body, and problems plaguing the nation-state register as symptoms of deeper troubles within the citizenry."²⁸ Mason's genealogy of the bushi as a mutable icon is a potent tool to analyze *FFVII*'s negotiations of masculine ideals.

Postwar Japan has undergone significant changes to redraft the ideal masculine subject. Two other noteworthy masculine archetypes are the brave rescuer and the salaryman. With pacifism as the mandate, Japan's postwar modernity charged the military with wartime atrocities and rejected the masculine ideal that the military upheld. One of the consequences of anti-militarism was the loud domestic opposition toward Japan's establishment of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF).²⁹ The SDF had to reimagine their masculine ideal as gentle rescuers of civilians. The SDF's redefinition of wartime masculinity contains several vital elements of postwar masculinity. One is the total rejection of violence. For instance, the SDF must

²⁷ Ibid., 68.

²⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁹ James Joseph Orr, *Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu, HI, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 52.

withdraw from violent situations due to the peacekeeping law.³⁰ This obligation requires the new masculine ideal to harbor a natural aversion towards violence. Another element is what Frühstück posits as Japan's contemporary anxiety about "the masculinity of its men."³¹ This new form of anxiety stems from Japan's demilitarization and the emergence of a new contender of the masculine ideal – the hard-working salaryman who provides for the family. Dasgupta, through detailed interviews, identifies and troubles what he calls salaryman masculinity.³² Dasgupta links interrogations of salaryman masculinity to “the intensifying collective socio-cultural anxiety” in the post-bubble economy.³³ The salaryman became a contentious masculine exemplar during the “lost decade,” and conversations about the role of the salaryman resonate with the precarious nature of post-postwar Japan.

FFVII, a product of the lost decade, summons the bushi, the brave rescuer, and the salaryman to define masculinity. Sephiroth is a representative of the bushi, who embodies wartime masculine ideals through his strength and prowess on the battlefield. *FFVII* hints at the destructive nature of Sephiroth's masculinity through his weapon of choice – an elongated sword called Masamune, namesake of Japan's legendary swordsmith Gorō Nyūdō Masamune. While Japanese soldiers did not use

³⁰ Sabine Frühstück, “After Heroism: Must Real Soldiers Die?” in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall, Asia: Local Studies / Global Themes (Berkeley, [Calif.]; University of California Press, 2011), 93–114, 103.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

³² Romit Dasgupta, *Re-Reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities*, Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) East Asian Series (London; Routledge, 2012), 40.

³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

swords during WWII, Japanese officers often carried guntō, a ceremonial military sword that embodies sprits of bushi or bushidō. Bushidō was widely mobilized during the total war and was crucial in postwar Japan. One of the writers Mason examined is Yukio Mishima, who sees bushidō as the epitome of masculinity and a product of war.³⁴ Mishima lauds the kamikaze pilots as patriotic masculine heroes, which explains why he invokes bushidō to protest postwar Japan’s pacifism.³⁵ In the same vein, many Japanese officers surrendered guntō, another symbol of the bushidō, to the Allied forces as a sign of defeat in 1945.

Besides his sword, Sephiroth’s angelic presence echoes Mishima’s “manly beauty.” Mason argues that Mishima advocates the cultivation of “manly beauty” to define the masculine response to death, that “[a] sharply dressed and groomed man thus proves that he has succeeded in accepting, even embracing, death.”³⁶ Sephiroth’s slivery long hair, slender but muscular physique, and weapon of choice make him the angel of death and the manifestation of bushidō. Sephiroth’s angelic beauty is also a product of religious and spiritual coding (figure 3.3).

³⁴ Michele M. Mason, “Empowering the Would-Be Warrior: Bushidō and the Gendered Bodies of the Japanese Nation,” in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall, Asia: Local Studies / Global Themes (Berkeley, [Calif.]; University of California Press, 2011), 68–90, 78.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.



Figure 3.3. Tetsuya Nomura’s artistic rendition of Sephiroth for Final Fantasy VII.

Ceschino P. Brooks de Vita notes the name Sephiroth’s scriptural roots.³⁷ The Kabbala(h) is a Jewish mystical tradition that entails ten attributes of the divine, often represented as branches on a tree.³⁸ Sephiroth is the name of the tree, which Brooks de Vita highlights to posit that “one can see Sephiroth, a being engineered to be perfect, as his creators’ intended physical embodiment of the divine.”³⁹ Additionally,

³⁷ Ceschino P. Brooks de Vita, “The Bringer of Light Becomes the Fallen Angel: Sephiroth, Lucifer, and Frankenstein’s Creature,” in *The World of Final Fantasy VII: Essays on the Game and Its Legacy*, ed. Jason C. Cash and Craig T. Olsen (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2023), 13–52, 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Brooks de Vita underscores that Sephiroth's proximity to the divine is evident in his portrayal as a beautiful fallen angel, Lucifer.⁴⁰ Adding the sublime to these considerations, one can position Sephiroth with the unknowable divinity and impossible perfection. A shared aspect of these configurations is the patriarchal articulation of power and control.

Cloud, conversely, represents the unrefined masculine subject who requires further discipline. Cloud's iconic weapon, the buster sword, looks like a giant kitchen knife, which contrasts sharply with Masamune's deadly precision. The buster sword's shield-like design suggests Cloud's role as a defender in the story, and its crude design implies Cloud's unrefined nature, which sets the foundation for a coming-of-age story. *FFVII* demonstrates the shifting definitions of masculinity through a flashback between Cloud and his childhood friend Tifa. Before leaving town, Cloud meets Tifa and talks about his plans.

Cloud: Come this spring... I'm leaving this town for Midgar.

Tifa: All the boys are leaving.

Cloud: But I'm different from all of them. I'm not just going to find a job. I want to join SOLDIER. I'm going to be the best there is, just like Sephiroth!

Tifa: Sephiroth... The Great Sephiroth. Isn't it hard to join SOLDIER?

Cloud: ...I probably won't be able to come back to this town for a while.

Tifa: Will you be in the newspapers if you do well?

Cloud: I'll try.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

Tifa: Hey, why don't we make a promise? Umm, if you get really famous and I'm ever in a bind..... You come save me, all right?

Cloud: All right..... I promise.

This brief exchange contains opinions on three masculine archetypes. The young Cloud believes he can achieve recognition by becoming a warrior or bushi. Both Tifa and Cloud position Sephiroth as the sublime figure who embodies strength and success. Interestingly, Cloud places bushi above the salaryman archetype. Stressing how he differs from other boys who leave town to become office workers, Cloud's aspiration highlights his ignorance toward the perils of wartime masculinity. That said, just like in real life, Frühstück argues that "despite the common rejection of the salaryman as a figure of undesirable manhood, the reality of a soldier's life is not that far from that of a salaryman."⁴¹ Soldiers, as well as *FFVII*'s SOLDIER, require the power system to recognize them as manly.

Tifa encourages Cloud to differentiate between masculine archetypes. Her comments provide barometers for masculinity. First, by bringing up other boys, Tifa prompts Cloud to reject the salaryman in favor of the heroic bushi. Secondly, Tifa's mentioning of the newspapers underscores Cloud's desire for recognition. Finally, by making Cloud promise to save her, Tifa defines protection as an essential component of masculinity. In short, Tifa sets the parameters of the masculine ideal: heroism, excellence through discipline, and a duty to protect. Through this exchange and Cloud's later rejection of Sephiroth, *FFVII* shapes the ideal postwar masculine subject

⁴¹ Frühstück, "After Heroism: Must Real Soldiers Die?," 94.

as a heroic defender. Sabine Frühstück coins "tamed masculinity" to describe the SDF's reframing of the heroic figure as a brave individual who rescues civilians during natural disasters. In *FFVII*, Cloud's actualized self reflects tamed masculinity. Femininity is critical in shaping masculine ideals, as demonstrated in the exchange between Tifa and Cloud. The masculine subject cannot perform heroism without an object to protect or save. Without a proper cause, masculine rivalries are meaningless phallic exercises. Masculinity, therefore, is defined by its relationship and proximity to femininity as a metaphor for weakness.

The Monstrous Feminine

To understand masculine ideals, we must define their relationship to femininity. Tifa sets the masculine barometers for the young Cloud, and Aerith's death allows him to mature into the tamed masculine subject. Sephiroth's relationship with two feminine figures cast him as both a threat through killing Aerith and a victim manipulated by the alien mother, Jenova.

Aerith is a postcolonial metaphor made explicit through Jenova's role as an alien invader. Though Jenova does not have substantial characterizations, her influence permeates every aspect of *FFVII*. Jenova is an extraterrestrial life-form that landed two thousand years before *FFVII*. As a sublime threat, Jenova almost destroyed the Indigenous people known as the Cetra by infecting them with a virus that mutated them into monsters. Jenova's initial impact left a crater at the northern part of the world map, also the game's place of final confrontation. The Cetra calls Jenova the

“cosmic calamity,” *sora kara kita yakusai*, accentuating her sublimity. As the story progresses, the crew learns that Shinra has been harvesting Jenova’s cells to enhance SOLDIER members, including Cloud and Sephiroth. This empowerment comes with the price of manipulation. Even the archetype of wartime masculinity, Sephiroth, falls under the control of Jenova.

Mother as a monstrous figure draws from patriarchal imaginations of femininity. Sarah Stang combines the abject and monster theory to examine monstrous feminine figures in video games.⁴² By observing how players can slay monstrous feminine figures in video games, Stang argues that play becomes a cathartic exercise of “patriarchal fear of and revulsion towards female reproductive powers.”⁴³ The abject horror of the female body and the monstrous otherness femininity represents help to explain Jenova’s role in shaping Sephiroth’s masculinity. Furthermore, Sephiroth’s relationship with Jenova parallels a postwar reflection that separates the nation-state from its subjects. Jenova’s control over Sephiroth renders her the responsible party for the calamity. Thus, Jenova becomes a convenient stand-in for anything postwar Japan deems undesirable.

As a mother figure, Jenova represents the malevolent wartime nation-state that manipulates her subjects into war and destruction. As a comic threat, Jenova left an

⁴² Sarah Stang, “The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine: Abject Maternity in Video Games,” *Nordlit*, no. 42 (November 11, 2019): 233–56, <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5014>, 233.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 252.

unhealable wound that became the North Crater. *FFVII* further strengthens Jenova's sublimity through her proximity to postwar Japan's nuclear discourse. Racheal Hutchinson examines allegories of nuclear power in the *Final Fantasy* series, and her examination of *FFVII* poignantly identifies the game's postwar pacifist view on nuclear energy.⁴⁴ Hutchinson identifies Mako energy as a nuclear power allegory and highlights two understandings of nuclearity. The first understanding of nuclear power adheres to postwar Japan's pacifism, which advocates against atomic weaponry, whereas the second emphasizes postwar Japan's victimhood.⁴⁵ Additionally, Hutchinson identifies contemporary nuclear concerns, such as the Fukushima incident, as a continued discussion of the atomic bombings.⁴⁶ In other words, Japan's nuclear discourse is textured by continuous reflections on the atomic bombings in 1945, which makes nuclearity an essential aspect of Japan's postwar identity.

Though Hutchinson's argument draws from her framing of Mako energy as a nuclear allegory, I believe the symmetry between Jenova's cell as a mutagen and nuclear radiation allows Jenova to symbolize fears and anxieties toward nuclear power. Also, as stated earlier, evidence of Jenova's material devastation summons imaginations of the atomic bombings. As the embodiment of ultimate evil in *FFVII*, Jenova's alien mother identity creates different conditions for masculinity. She manipulates the bushi

⁴⁴ Racheal Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019),

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

into evil deeds, and by confronting her, the postwar subject can emerge as the heroic savior. Through different relationships with Jenova, the rivalry between Cloud and Sephiroth brings the tension between wartime and postwar masculine ideals to the fore.

The Beautiful

Aerith is the antithesis of Jenova. Jenova is the manipulative alien mother, whereas Aerith is the nurturing Indigenous woman. As the last Cetra in the world, Aerith can commune with the land to harness its power through the Lifestream. Her magical ability summons stereotypical imagination of Indigenous communities, yet Aerith's character design is not coded with cultural stereotypes like Nanaki. *FFVII* expresses Aerith's indigeneity through her beliefs and mystical relationship with the land. Cloud first encounters Aerith when she is selling flowers amid chaos, positioning her as the last ray of hope in the world of turmoil. The first proper meeting between the two takes place in an abandoned church in Sector 5. The broken roof of the church allows sunlight to reach into the chamber. Yellow flowers, which have become synonymous with Aerith, break free from the wooden floor and thrive under the sunlight. It is a remarkable sight because plants do not grow in Midgar thanks to the exploitation of Mako energy. Hutchinson describes mako energy as a thinly disguised allegory of nuclear power by highlighting the game's description of mako energy's superior efficiency over fossil energy.⁴⁷ Furthermore, in-game technologies associated with

⁴⁷ Ibid., 136.

mako energy, such as "mako reactor" and "mako radiation therapy," gesture toward nuclear power.⁴⁸ If not appropriately handled, mako reactors, like their real-life counterpart, can lead to environmental devastation. *FFVII* positions Aerith as the cure to the world in crisis and highlights her resilience and endurance, virtues held by postwar Japan.

Another crucial aspect of Aerith is her spirituality. Aside from her magical connection to the land, she holds the key to the Promised Land, a place full of mako energy. As revealed later in the story, the Promised Land is not a physical space but a spiritual resting sanctuary for the Cetra people once they have completed their journey. While the Christian-themed church seems to imply the Promised Land as an afterlife, the narrative framing around Aerith and the Promised Land actually draws from Eastern religions, notably Pure Land Buddhism and Shintoism. There is no all-knowing deity that dictates the world's principles but a collective ancestral consciousness that seeks to protect and nurture the planet. Aerith also functions as the spiritual guide who can lead people to the Promised Land, the same way a bodhisattva can guide others to the pure land. Gregory D. Jones JR. examines *FFVII*'s Christian religious symbolism and comments on Aerith's spiritual significance.⁴⁹ Jones configures Aerith as a Christ-like figure who leaves the party to perform prayer and is later sacrificed.⁵⁰ Tellingly,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁹ Gregory D. Jones, "Final FantaSi' VII: Role-Playing the Eco-Ethics of Laudato Si'," in *The World of Final Fantasy VII: Essays on the Game and Its Legacy*, ed. Jason C. Cash and Craig T. Olsen (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2023), 104–21, 117.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 119.

Aerith prays for a force called “Holy,” strengthening her spiritual connection.⁵¹

Aerith’s mixed religious symbolism makes her later sacrifice legible to people with different cultural and religious background.

Aerith's nurturing nature is the direct opposite of Jenova's propensity for destruction, which parallels one differentiation between the sublime and the beautiful. Shaw observes that “the sublime is a divisive force, encouraging feelings of difference and deference,” whereas “the beautiful encourages a spirit of unity and harmony.”⁵²

Jenova is a sublime threat for Cloud to overcome and achieve transcendence. Aerith’s femininity is beautifully fragile and encourages unity. True to her nature, Aerith acts as the healer in the party. While her high magic attribute makes her a great candidate for offensive magical spells, none of her unique abilities, also known as Limit Breaks, deal damage. Aerith embodies the beautiful and creates different parameters for masculinity. Before discussing Aerith’s death, we must consider her relationship with another important character, Zack, who embodies tamed masculinity. Zack is Cloud’s friend and a SOLDIER member. *FFVII* demonstrates Zack’s masculine traits through his protection of Aerith, fight against the system, and eventual self-sacrifice to save Cloud. The trauma of Zack’s death makes Cloud lose parts of his memories and conflate his identity with Zack’s.

⁵¹ Ibid., 119.

⁵² Shaw, *The Sublime*, 12.

Zack and Cloud both have Jenova cells in their body which makes them vulnerable to Jenova's control. Unlike Zack, Cloud has a much more difficult time fighting off Jenova and is sometimes compelled to do her bidding. Cloud's weakness is demonstrated as his inability to safeguard a magical item called Black Materia that can be used to summon the apocalypse. Jenova compels Cloud to hand over the Black Materia to her favorite child Sephiroth and to kill Aerith. Cloud's weakness, compared to Zack, is made more evident through the death of Aerith, who Zack manages to protect. The relationship between Aerith and her protectors allows the masculine subject to articulate power through its ability to protect the feminine.

Through metaphors, *FFVII* highlights postwar discourse preoccupied with Japan's victimhood by aligning with its colonial others during the war. Aerith is an allegory of a peace-loving Japan that alludes to a fictitious harmonious prewar Japan. Her femininity is defined by traumas endured by the land, her ancestors, and herself. Aerith accentuates the virtues of endurance and perseverance by becoming the stand-in for the feminized postwar nation-state. Igarashi notes that feminization is a narrative strategy that privileges Japan's victimhood. For instance, Igarashi analyzes several postwar texts through the lens of cultural studies to demonstrate how gender and body are deployed strategically in these narratives to reflect nationalist concerns in postwar Japan.⁵³ Igarashi explores the feminization of Japan in his analysis of *Shina no yoru*, in which he posits that "by moving into the feminine position that Asia

⁵³ Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, 36.

had occupied, Japan easily assumed the role of the victim."⁵⁴ My earlier analysis of Wutai resonates with Igarashi's analysis. Gender and ambiguous cultural representations can solicit correct emotional responses, which can be mobilized to construct the ideal masculine subject. In other words, emotions, channeled through the feminine body, validate the masculine ideal by granting it a purpose.

Traumatic Femininity

Cloud worships Zack as the pinnacle of masculinity. Because Cloud does not perceive himself as strong as Zack, he believes only Zack can save the world. After Zack's sacrifice, Cloud's inability to mourn, or melancholia, forces him to pretend he is Zack to compensate for his weakness. Cloud's identity unravels when his body betrays his will to surrender the item capable of summoning the apocalypse to Sephiroth. The player loses control over Cloud and a version of Cloud's younger self appears to bear witness to this moment of powerlessness. After the traumatic encounter, Cloud spirals into despair and unintentionally attacks Aerith. Adding to the consequences of Cloud's inability to discipline his body, an essential requirement for masculinity, Aerith leaves the party to perform the ritual by herself. Instead of blaming Cloud, Aerith comforts and forgives him by appearing in his dream. Cloud and the crew chase after Aerith the next day and find her praying in the small shrine surrounded by water. As he approaches Aerith, Cloud comes under Sephiroth's influence again and draws his sword but manages to retain control and puts away his sword. When Cloud

⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

believes he has mastered control over his body, Sephiroth leaps from above and pierces Aerith's body with his signature sword, Masamune. As the White Materia leaps from Aerith's sliced pink bow into the water, Aerith dies without making a sound. This cutscene solidifies Aerith's virtues of sacrifice, perseverance, and devotion. Cloud holds Aerith and cries angrily while Sephiroth taunts him about his weakness (figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4. Aerith dies in Cloud's arms as Sephiroth taunts Cloud in the background.

Reading the scene through the postwar context, Aerith's trauma is caused by Masamune, a symbol of wartime masculinity and a reminder of war's disastrous eventuality. The permanent death of Aerith becomes the trauma narrative that shapes

Cloud's identity. Aerith's body serves as the vehicle for Cloud's maturation and the bearer of the consequences of his immaturity. Reading Aerith as the medium of wartime trauma, the game becomes a story of mourning. It is never about saving the girl but mourning the girl.

After the traumatic ending of Disc 1, Disc 2 ruminates on the loss of Aerith, which ends with Cloud finding himself. Tifa helps Cloud retrieve his real memory, which allows him to separate from Zack. Cloud confesses to the team that he has been living with a false identity.

The combination of Jenova cells, Sephiroth's strong will, and my own weakness are what created me. Everyone knew that. I'm... Cloud...the master of my own illusionary world. But I can't remain trapped in an illusion anymore. I'm going to live my life without pretending.

Cloud's revelation reflects on the parameters established in the flashback sequence between Tifa and him. Instead of valorizing strength, Cloud prioritizes free will over any power the system grants. He finds power by acknowledging weakness. By attributing his mistakes to Jenova and Sephiroth, Cloud sets himself apart from the wartime definition of masculinity. Cloud emerges as the postwar masculine subject by rejecting violence and mourning Aerith, who represents the trauma of the war. Cloud's revelation resonates with Igarashi's foundational narrative, where the collective trauma of the war is inevitable and necessary.

This confession sets up Cloud's final confrontation with Sephiroth, which pits wartime and postwar masculine ideals against each other. After commanding Cloud to hand over the Black Materia, Sephiroth takes it to the North Crater. Sephiroth wants

to use the magic item to summon a world-ending spell called “Meteor” to encourage the lifestream to aggregate at the site. By traumatizing the planet and forcing the lifestream to heal it, Sephiroth hopes to harness the magic power and attain divinity. Sephiroth’s desire for power and disregard for consequences announce the danger of wartime masculinity.

The final battles against Sephiroth occur within the depth of the Northern Cave, the planet’s original wound caused by Jenova. Before the crew can face Sephiroth, they must first defeat a powerful incarnation of Jenova. Jenova takes several forms throughout the game, including Jenova·BIRTH, Jenova·LIFE, and Jenova·DEATH. The naming tradition alludes to her sublime authority over life. The final version of Jenova, known as Jenova·SYNTHESIS, is a sphere-shaped gigantic mass with a feminine torso and tentacles. Adding to Stang’s use of the abject and the monstrous feminine, I posit that this version of Jenova also invokes the sublime through her overwhelming strength and scale and her function as an opportunity to transcend by overcoming her. Jenova·SYNTHESIS is *FFVII*’s giant woman at the end of the world who mixes the uncanny monstrous mother with eldritch horror. Jenova·SYNTHESIS has a vulvic form with a blooming flower design. Her fallopian-tube-like tentacles complete the visual metaphor of the female reproductive system, which highlights her role as a monstrous mother. Her sublime and uncanny visage demands her beholders to face her with fear and awe. The usual combat sequence places the party and the enemies on roughly two sides of the screen. Jenova·SYNTHESIS appears in front of

the party, looming over them as an existential threat. Adhering to aesthetic traditions of the sublime, we see the back of the party as they face ineffable horror (figure 3.5).

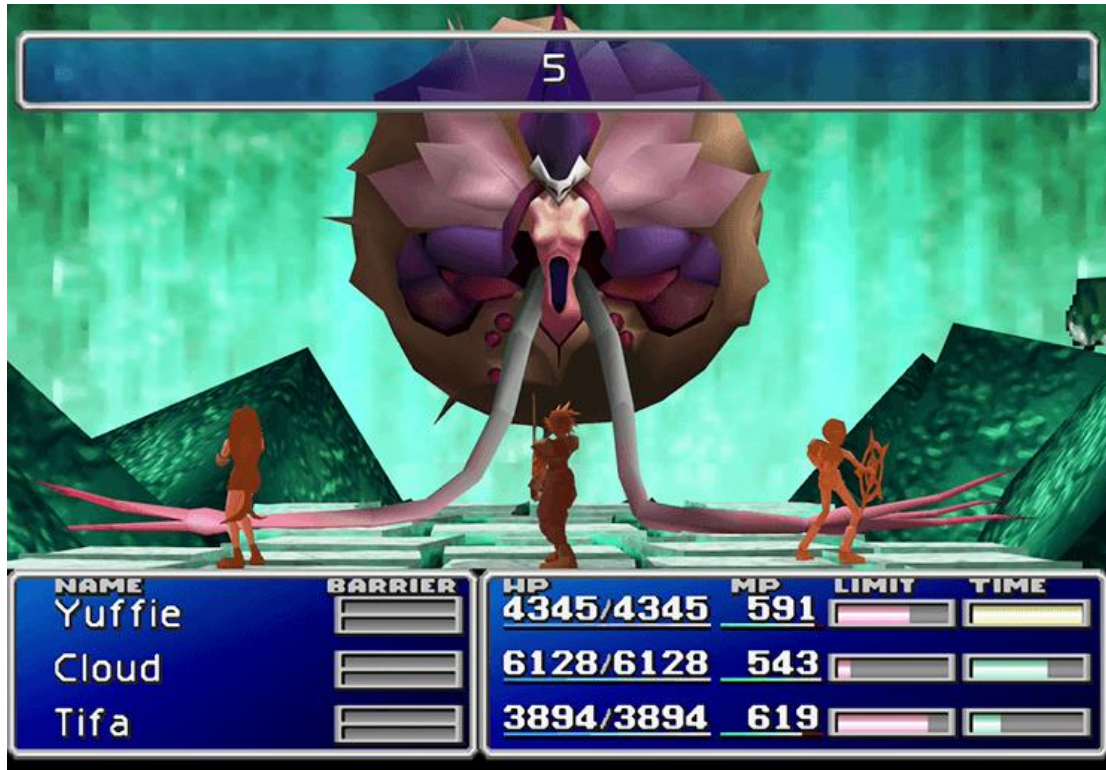


Figure 3.5. The crew faces Jenova·SYNTHESIS, a monstrous and sublime threat.

After defeating Jenova·SYNTHESIS, Cloud, and the crew can face Sephiroth in three stages. As the final confrontation between wartime and postwar masculine ideals, the player assumes control of Cloud to defeat varying iterations of Sephiroth, each embodies different qualities of the sublime (figure 3.6). Bizarro·Sephiroth is the first form, a grotesque and enormous entity fused by different bodies that resemble Sephiroth. Safer·Sephiroth is the second form that mirrors the design of Jenova·SYNTHESIS. This version of Sephiroth is a giant one-winged angel with additional wings attached to the bottom of his body, the zenith of power.



Figure 3.6. Top to bottom: Bizarro-Sephiroth, an amalgamation of different versions of Sephiroth; Safer-Sephiroth, a perverted image of divinity and power; Cloud and Sephiroth stand against each other in the battle sequence's usual composition.

The design of Safer Sephiroth employs religious symbolism, such as the halo and the angelic wings, to convey his larger-than-life divine presence. After defeating Sephiroth in his monstrous and divine forms, Cloud faces the final version of Sephiroth in his original humanoid form. The camera angle of the final confrontation places Cloud and Sephiroth on two sides of the screen, leveling the playing field between the masculine ideals they each represent. Only by killing Sephiroth can Cloud actualize as a postwar masculine subject. Cloud's triumph over Sephiroth, which prevents the world from ending, shows that his strength comes from his choice to protect. After the combats, we see the lifestream materialize to heal Cloud, from which a hand, possibly belonging to Aerith, reaches out to take Cloud to safety.

The series of confrontations of divine and devious forces suggest a transcendence, which would align the series with the Romantic sublime. But the game engages with postmodernism in its landscape construction, through which the player navigates while bearing witness to destruction. As I briefly mentioned, the final moment of *FFVII* suggests a posthuman world, which places a melancholic wrench in the triumph earned by the party. The party might have saved the world by overcoming divine entities, but an end to humanity remains inevitable.

FFVII invites players to embark on a journey of self-discovery in a perpetually apocalyptic world, punctuated with post-postwar Japan's reflections on the past and future. Through the figure of Cloud, the game explores life's meaning by interrogating various masculine ideals. I place *FFVII* against its cultural backdrop to highlight

femininity's metaphoric role in negotiating masculine ideals. The enduring impact of Aerith's death speaks to her crucial role in the story and the ability of video games, as a medium, to turn play into a process of mourning and transcendence.

To read *FFVII* through a gendered lens is not to deny the pain of losing the flower girl but to interrogate assumptions about sexual differences. Can a story about a world in perpetual crisis remain compelling if it moves away from negotiating masculine ideals, or perhaps the perpetually apocalyptic setting will always favor masculinity because it is built on patriarchy? Femininity, on the other hand, remains static until it is summoned to define new masculine ideals. Through the lens of gender, we can break down the apolitical façade to challenge patriarchal configurations of power and control. *FFVII* demonstrates the role of play in representing cultural memories and the construction of identity. In the next chapter, I will expand my analysis of play to dwelling in the digital landscape, especially ruins.

CHAPTER 4: Sublime Ruins

Tasked with recovering lost parcels, you carefully guide your avatar, Sam, to the ruins outside South Knot City. The heavy rain, known as “timefall,” makes the already difficult-to-traverse muddy ground slick as Sam stumbles despite your tight grip on the controller. Timefall also suggests the presence of invisible spectral entities, known as "Beached Things" or "BTs," that would attack anyone on sight. You want to make this trip short because timefall can accelerate the progress of time of anything it touches and eventually expose the content of the parcels and render the mission a failure. As you carefully decide which parcel to retrieve, you hear the baby cooing in the container strapped to Sam's chest. The container baby called a “Bridged Baby” or “BB,” is an unborn fetus that has been taken from a brain-dead mother. Thanks to their unique relationship to life and death, BBs can detect the presence of BTs, which usually are invisible. Bridges operatives, like Sam, can attach themselves to BB through a wire shaped like an umbilical cord to visualize BTs.

You carefully navigate the ruins while the scanner attached to the container baby rotates on Sam’s shoulder, scanning for danger. Firmly holding down the trigger buttons on the controller to ensure the steadiness of Sam's movement, you slowly collect the parcels scattered among collapsed bridges and buildings. The haptics of the controller remind you of the bumpiness of the terrain as you feel the contour of the landscape in your hands.

Sam's backpack is filling up quicker than you have anticipated, and the uneven stack on Sam's back carrier makes movement much more challenging and slower. You must find the last two parcels with awkward movement despite rearranging the package to create an even load distribution. The scanner's blue flashes suddenly turn into a spinning red warning, and you can see BTs moving toward Sam.

You are relieved to find blood grenades in your inventory and aim at the fast-approaching BTs. It is a successful throw! Just as you relish the banishment of the BTs, you see a pool of black tar forming beneath Sam, from which figures covered in black tar-like substances begin pulling him down. Not wanting to lose balance, you navigate Sam to the pool's edge, hoping to end this horrifying encounter. It is, however, too late. You lose control over Sam as the black current drags him to the edge of the city ruin. The pool has become a lake where debris and buildings emerge and submerge. You attempt to find a way out, but a lion-like monster with a golden mask swiftly attacks Sam, which triggers a giant explosion, represented by visual distortion followed by a white screen.

You find Sam in an ethereal ocean after the explosion. Helpful texts appear on the screen to inform you that you can bring Sam back to life by swimming toward his body. Sam's death is diegetic, and you can resurrect him thanks to his unique ability to "repatriate." When you approach Sam, the camera swiftly enters through his mouth to find the container baby who awaits your return. You regain control after Sam purges the black substance out of his body. What remains after the explosion, known

as a "voidout," is now an impermeable crater to which you must bear witness (figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1. Sam looks at the aftermath of a voidout.

The melancholic undertone and the harrowing encounter contrast sharply with the mundane task of retrieving lost parcels. The crater and the ruins are immovable monuments, and walking through the debris and stumbling upon indignant specters feels more like a mourning process. But what exactly is being mourned here? The opening describes one possible player experience of *Death Stranding* (2019). Though a more careful player will not trigger a voidout, I bring this encounter to the fore to highlight the sublime quality of the ruin and the encounter with the BTs. One of the early receptions of *Death Stranding* labels the game as a “walking simulator” due to its lack of combat. Indeed, while it is thrilling to explore a perpetually apocalyptic world, being a delivery person is still a mundane job. Critics of *Gone Home* (2013)

conceived the “walking simulator” to suggest the lack of interactivity of the game, in which the player moves around in an empty house to solve a mystery.¹ The pejorative connotation of the term abated as players, designers, and scholars embraced it to explore the role of dwelling in video games. Melissa Kagen elegantly foregrounds wandering as a fundamental theme of walking simulators, which are “exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space.”² Kagen notes that while *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us* series can be better categorized as action/roleplaying games, through the lens of wandering, one can “start to wonder what all this movement is meant to convey or able to compensate for.”³ Kagen’s insistence on wander resonates nicely with Oscar Moralde’s emphasis on the digital landscape, through which the player wanders.

Oscar Moralde opens his analysis of *Dear Esther* (2012), a walking simulator, with a powerful claim that “Landscape is never neutral.”⁴ Moralde extends Laura U. Marks’s “haptic visuality,” which describes the graspable texture of image on the screen, to video games by configuring *Dear Esther*’s landscape as a process that

¹ Carbo-Mascarell Rosa, “Walking Simulators: The Digitisation of an Aesthetic Practice,” 2016, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_66.pdf, 2.

² Melissa Kagen, *Wandering Games*, 1st ed., The MIT Press (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13856.001.0001>, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴ Oscar Moralde, “Haptic Landscapes: Dear Esther and Embodied Video Game Space,” *Media Fields Journal*, August 1, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/13216351/Haptic_Landscapes_Dear_Esther_and_Embodied_Video_Game_Space, 2.

“oscillates between looking-at and moving-through.”⁵ Moralde considers play as a form of meditation and the landscape as a persuasive agent. *Dear Esther* follows a relatively linear story, but how does space change in an open-world game where players can roam and explore? By analyzing the digital geographies of San Andreas in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, Soraya Murray argues that game spaces make social and political statements through player engagement.⁶ Murray poignantly argues that digital spaces allow the game and the player to “necessarily mutually affect each other.”⁷ Bringing Moralde and Murray into a conversation, I propose to see *Death Stranding* as a work that leverages haptic visuality to create space for meditation while its open-world structure encourages the player to create personal relationships with digital space and the real world. *Death Stranding*’s landscape makes ideological claims through the sublime. By scrutinizing how the sublime, as an aesthetic condition and a political apparatus, influences the game, this chapter aims to locate echoes of Japan’s post-postwar modernity reverberating throughout a story about the United States.

Death Stranding is about a journey to the West. While I do not believe the classic Chinese novel about a monk achieving enlightenment inspires the game, self-actualization is a prevalent theme in *Death Stranding*. In addition to landscapes, I

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Soraya Murray, “High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing ‘Grand Theft Auto,’” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no. 2 (2005): 91–98, 97.

⁷ Ibid., 98.

want to focus on the cause and effect, the beginning, and the end of the journey – a woman split into two called Bridget/Amelie. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, a gendered approach to identity exploration can unveil a text's patriarchal underpinnings. *Death Stranding* considers the meaning of life in a precarious world through the personal struggles of its cast. Bridget starts Sam on the journey and her alter ego, Amelie, waits at the journey's end as the final confrontation.

On the one hand, Bridget is the former President of the United States, responsible for reconnecting broken America while battling and succumbing to her uterine cancer. On the other hand, Bridget is Amelie, a spirit stranded in the afterlife known as the “Beach,” who assumes the role of the harbinger of the end, also known as the “Sixth Extinction Entity.” There have been five major extinction events on Earth and a randomly selected entity is gifted with prophetic visions about the imminent end and the power to precipitate the calamity. Bridget/Amelie's duality as the quest giver and the final boss, the damsel in distress, and the monster, the nurturing mother and the object of desire, informs Sam and the player's understanding of a precarious world – both in the game and outside of it.

In this chapter, I will first provide background of the game, relevant scholarship, and my contribution. Secondly, I will establish qualities of the sublime and explore how *Death Stranding* stages the sublime in its architectural, environmental, and character designs. Thirdly, I will consider the political affordance of the sublime, namely the postmodern sublime's potency in disrupting official narratives by understanding how

the game works with and against Yoshikuni Igarashi's "foundational narrative." Though the game is set in the United States, it meditates on themes intimately linked to Japan's post-postwar modernity, a blend between reflections on Japan's wartime trauma and anxieties towards future precarity, such as the state's failure to protect its subjects, environmental degradation, and economic instability. Finally, I will focus on the role of gender in facilitating and disrupting the game's thesis on the human condition.

The Many Ways to Read a Perpetually Apocalyptic Text

As the debut of Hideo Kojima's independent Studio Kojima Productions, *Death Stranding* follows a courier named Sam Porter Bridges conducting transcontinental unification of the postapocalyptic United States by delivering materials, building infrastructures, and joining lost communities. It is also a story about struggling against the end of the world, represented as an inescapable titular extinction event, "Death Stranding." The game has garnered research interest with various disciplinary approaches. Barbaros Bostan and Çakır Aker apply a set of heuristics to break down and analyze the narrative.⁸ Mixing narrative and game mechanic analyses, Beatrice Näsling explores how the game creates an unconventional heroic figure by providing

⁸ Barbaros Bostan and Çakır Aker, "Using Heuristics for Evaluating Game Narrative: A Close Reading of *Death Stranding*," in *Games and Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. Barbaros Bostan, International Series on Computer Entertainment and Media Technology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 299–314, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81538-7_19, 312.

alternatives to violence and highlighting the significance of human connection.⁹

Antonio José Planells De La Maza and Víctor Navarro-Remesal reiterate the theme of the human bond by framing *Death Stranding* as a "slow game" that highlights the slow recovery after a societal and environmental collapse and the precariousness of Sam's labor of cybernetically and physically reuniting the United States.¹⁰ From the cultural studies perspective, Anja Kurasov views the game as a critique of American Exceptionalism.¹¹ Kurasov eloquently presents the irony of reuniting a nation whose ideological pillar favors individualism and exceptionalism.¹² Impressively, Amy M. Green proposes the game as a treatise on the human condition that spotlights the crucial role of human connection in rebuilding societies.¹³ Green's book concentrates on the interplay between the in-game and outside worlds. Green argues that the game erects human connection as the beacon in "a dark period in the real world of American and global histories punctuated by brushes with totalitarianism and a resurgence of racism and misogyny."¹⁴ This body of research outlines *Death*

⁹ Beatrice Näsling, "Stick vs. Rope. Gun vs. Strand: The Monomyth and the Hero as Warrior in Kojima Productions' 2019 Video Game *Death Stranding*, 2022, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kau:diva-90931>, 82.

¹⁰ Antonio José Planells De La Maza and Victor Navarro-Remesal, "Hybrid Ludomythologies: Mythanalysis, Tradition, and Contemporaneity in *Death Stranding*," in *Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, FDG '22 (New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2022), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555858.3555945>, 3.

¹¹ Anja Kurasov, "American Exceptionalism in *Death Stranding*: Videogames and Culture," *ForAP- Forschungsergebnisse von Absolventen und Promovierenden der SLK 5*, no. 5 (July 6, 2022): 131–46, <https://doi.org/10.5283/forap.78>, 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, 144.

¹³ Amy M. Green, *Longing, Ruin, and Connection in Hideo Kojima's Death Stranding* (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003273660>, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

Stranding's preoccupation with ideological, societal, and environmental concerns in the United States.

That said, studies often do not place *Death Stranding* within its cultural contexts, especially given the game's primarily Japanese staff and the director's history of melding Japanese perspectives into his games. Of course, scholars have located Japanese discourse within Kojima's previous games. Rachael Hutchison suggests Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* (MGS) series (1987 - 2015) as a "counter-discourse to the mainstream war game genre in Japan" through its engagement with nuclear weapons.¹⁵ Keita Moore focuses on the racial ambiguity of the MGS series' protagonist, Snake, to consider how his biracialism allows the game to criticize global militarism without the burden of Japan's wartime history.¹⁶ Moore focuses on Snake's body as a site of discourse and keenly observes that "Snake flattens the real politics of Japan's (historical) place in global conflict just as it transforms politicized questions of war memory into a unidimensional and abstract refrain of 'antiwar, anti-nuclear weapons.'"¹⁷ I have also argued elsewhere that, like Snake's body, *Death Stranding* uses Sam's white body to universalize reflections on Japan's postwar conditions for

¹⁵ Rachael Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*, 1 edition (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 229.

¹⁶ Keita Moore, "Playable Deniability: Biracial Representation and the Politics of Play in *Metal Gear Solid*," in *Made in Asia/America: Why Video Games Were Never (Really) about Us*, ed. Christopher B. Patterson and Tara Fickle, *Power Play: Games, Politics, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, n.d.), 99–114, 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

the global audience.¹⁸ Both Moore and I draw from Koichi Iwabuchi's "cultural odor" to describe the erasure of overt Japanese signifiers from globally celebrated Japanese media.¹⁹ Iwabuchi posits that odorless production helps separate Japanese media from its complicated history.²⁰ Though *Death Stranding* is set in the United States, the fictional landscape lacks clear American cultural signifiers and privileges Icelandic-esque environmental details and sublime ruins. In other words, the game uses the United States as a blank canvas to create stories about crisis, trauma, and identity.

This chapter uncovers the cultural background of these stories. It foregrounds the sublime to call attention to the symmetry between *Death Stranding*'s perpetual apocalyptic setting and the precarious post-postwar Japan. The sublime describes the experience of encountering something overwhelming yet transcendental if one can overcome it. Matthew Spokes paves the way for utilizing the sublime in video game analysis in his book, breaking down the virtual sublime into affective registers to explain moments in video games that are awe-inspiring, frightful, overwhelming, or simply sublime.²¹ Spokes stresses how virtual sublime encounters in video games persuade players to reflect on the present, which "are only achievable through types

¹⁸ Yasheng She, "Designing the Global Body: Japan's Postwar Modernity in *Death Stranding*," in *Made in Asia/America: Why Video Games Were Never (Really) about Us*, ed. Christopher B. Patterson and Tara Fickle, *Power Play: Games, Politics, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, n.d.), 115–31, 131.

¹⁹ Kōichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

²¹ Matthew Spokes, *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games.*, First edition (Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 146.

of play."²² Working within similar parameters but focusing on video games as an aesthetic form with multiple hardware and software components, Eugénie Shinkle finds the digital sublime in the blurry "boundary between the self and the machine."²³ Shinkle observes the digital sublime's uniqueness, which "elevated emotion in the banal."²⁴ Expands on Shinkle's digital sublime, Thomas Betts details how he staged the digital sublime in his games, such as *AvSeq* (2012) and *In Ruins* (2012), in his doctoral dissertation.²⁵ Remarkably, *In Ruins* shapes the Romantic sublime, notably the dreamlike aesthetics, into digital topology while cultivating an intimate relationship between the player and the environment through which the player meditates on their subjectivity.²⁶

These authors think through the sublime visually and ludically. However, there needs to be more consideration to link the virtual/digital sublime to cultural studies. Soraya Murray frames video games as a site of social engineering and political influence.²⁷ Following Murray, my analysis centers on the sublime as both a visual and political framework.

²² Ibid., 148.

²³ Eugénie Shinkle, "Videogames and the Digital Sublime," in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, ed. Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 94–108, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230391345_6, 95.

²⁴ Ibid., 95.

²⁵ Thomas Betts, "An Investigation of the Digital Sublime in Video Game Production" (doctoral, University of Huddersfield, 2014), 2.

²⁶ Ibid., 99.

²⁷ Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, International Library of Visual Culture 27 (London: IBTauris & CoLtd, 2018), 21.

Temporality of the Sublime

In Chapter 1, I discussed the significance of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) as a standard-making work for the sublime and its gendered power configuration. The painting captures the sublime as the masculine-coded subject stands triumphantly over the sea of fog. The overwhelming environment, the limitlessness suggested by the borders, and the excessive details illustrate the ironic pleasurable fear of the sublime, or, as Shaw puts it, "a promise of transcendence leading to the edge of an abyss."²⁸ The beholder of the painting is safe from the painted subject's danger and experiences the sublime vicariously through him. Like the painting, the player is safe from the eroding power of the timefall and the horror of the BTs. But does the player's control over Sam's body change the experience of the sublime? Players experience the sublime via Sam, and the element of play grants them a sense of responsibility.

The sublime is momentary, meaning the player experiences the sublime when familiar elements suddenly become alien. *Death Stranding's* main gameplay loop involves tedious delivery quests. I mentioned earlier that the early game's lack of equipment and facilities has garnered the label "walking simulator." While it is much larger with a more complex system than other walking simulators, *Death Stranding* prioritizes exploration and dwelling as storytelling methods. Nathan Altice coins the "virtual pastoral" to describe the satisfaction of discovering and virtually dwelling in the in-

²⁸ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 13.

game landscape of *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005). Altice links David Rosand's description of the pastoral landscape paintings as artificial constructs that simulate the natural world to *Shadow's* vast and idyllic landscape.²⁹ The virtual pastoral occurs when the player deviates from the "prescribed trajectory of mastery and goal-attainment."³⁰ *Shadow's* virtual pastoral, which "operates specifically as a spatial, temporal, and subjective engagement set apart from normative play," opens spaces for players to reflect and meditate.³¹ The sublime and the pastoral are concerned with the sense of dwelling but with opposing sentiments. I will borrow Altice's virtual pastoral to frame moments not succinctly sublime in *Death Stranding* and to posit that the player encounters the sublime when they are jolted from the pastoral.

Death Stranding's prologue perfectly outlines the shift between the pastoral and the sublime, the mundane and the unsettling. It opens with stills of landscapes that evoke a sensibility between magical realism and uncanniness: a vast open mountain range with floating objects, an upside-down rainbow over a grassy field, and mossy planes with sprouting hand-shaped crystals. Strange and unsettling objects blend in with the Icelandic-esque pastoral landscape and warn of the danger lurking beneath its beauty (figure 4.2).

²⁹ Nathan Altice, "The Virtual Pastoral," Metopal, September 22, 2010, <http://metopal.com/2010/09/22/the-virtual-pastoral/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

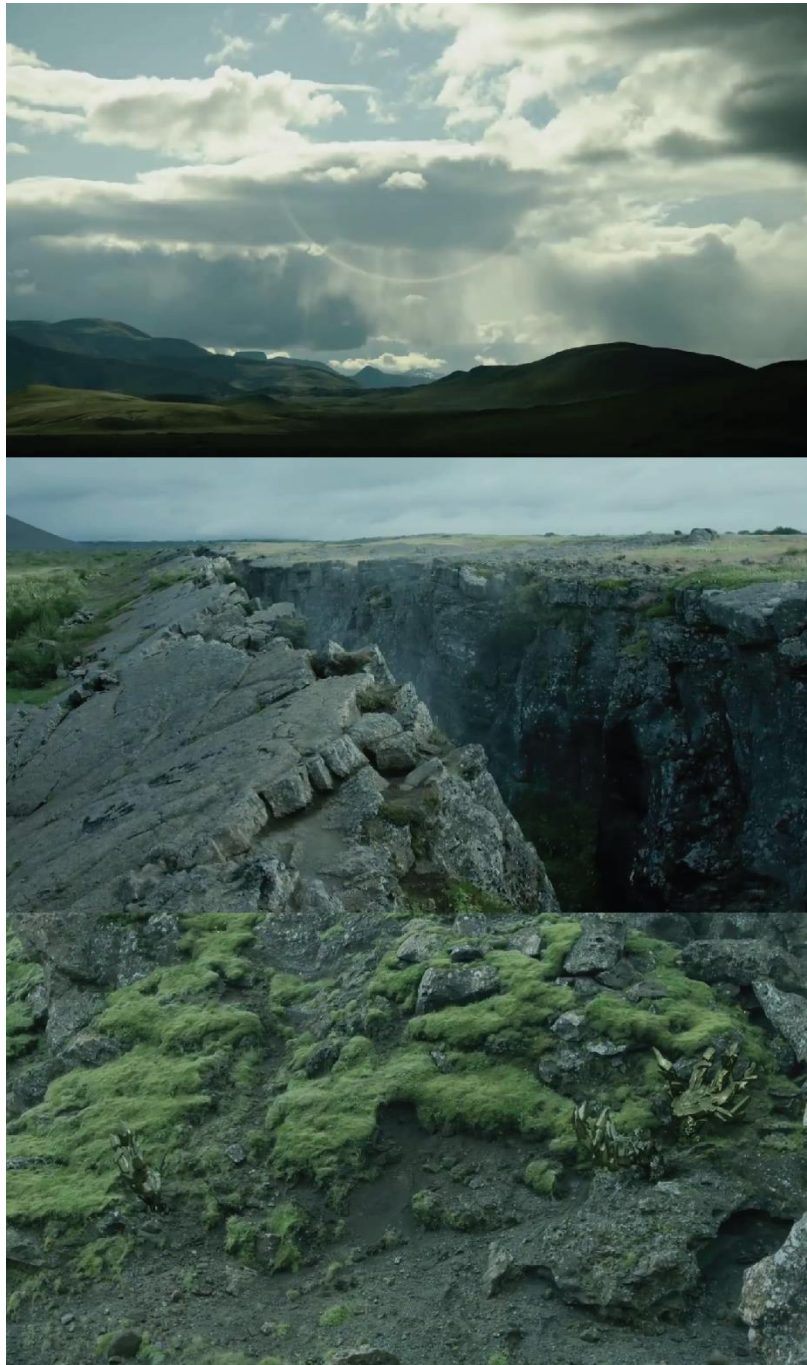


Figure 4.2. Stills from the game's prologue depict the sublime horror hidden within the pastoral landscape.

Breaking the stillness, a revving noise followed by a smoke trail announces the arrival of our protagonist, Sam Bridges. Donning a futuristic outfit, Sam notices the upside-down rainbow in the distance and begins to outrun the timefall. The first hint of danger comes from a raindrop falling on Sam's head and immediately turning one patch of hair grey. After losing control of the bike when he almost hits a mysterious woman, Sam falls from the bike and must retrieve the scattered cargo, which is when the game becomes playable.

The user interface (UI) of each cargo displays its value (represented as likes), destination, and content, which confirms our unlikely hero as a courier. The game immediately clarifies that the player needs to retain control over Sam's body through instructions as Sam stumbles to pick up scattered parcels. *Death Stranding* makes in-game movement a chore and a constant discipline by asking the player to grip the controller, allowing Sam to grip onto the straps of his back carrier for balance. This design decision slows down the gameplay.

After collecting all the parcels, the game instructs the player to seek shelter in a cave and wait out the timefall. Sam removes his suit inside the cave and reveals two distinct red markings on his back, suggesting his back barrier's heavy burden. As the camera moves to better lighting, we see ghostly handprints tattooed on his body. The sequence calls attention to the origin of the handprints by showing Sam looking at a set of handprints appearing inside the cave. An invisible BT is searching for Sam

when the mysterious woman, Fragile, whom Sam almost ran over, drags him away and instructs him to hold his breath.

The prologue establishes the interplay between the mundane pastoral environment and the unsettling sublime dangers the player will experience throughout the game. BTs often take on a humanoid shape, which does not perfectly align with the Romantic sublime; their ghostly presence conjures its postmodern interpretations. For instance, connecting Kant's notion of Isis as the goddess of mourning and Marjorie Garber's work on ghosts, Barbara Freeman positions ghosts with the sublime. She argues that they serve as a reminder of loss and "appear in the place where they have not been acknowledged or admitted."³² Freeman uses the feminine sublime to examine the ghostly presence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and proposes a feminist intervention of encountering the unrepresentable. Using *Beloved* as an example, Freeman argues that the feminine sublime does not seek to represent the horror of American slavery but, through the haunting ghostly figure, testifies to "both the traumatic institution of slavery and the immensity of that which cannot be said."³³

Like *Beloved*, BTs are haunting creatures who embody the unrepresentable, which is made even more apparent through their invisible nature—furthermore, Julia Kristeva's "abject" points to a place where meaning collapses.³⁴ The primary example

³² Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

of the abject is the desire to purge when gazing upon corpses and human wastes. Kristeva posits that the desire to disengage or purge the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”³⁵ Kristeva highlights the corpse as the utmost expression of abject because it is “death infecting life.”³⁶ As haunting reminders of death, BTs seek out any living being within the allowed distance of the umbilical cord attached to them. Intriguingly, they do not attack in the traditional sense but drag Sam down into a tar pit. Though BTs can appear anywhere in the open world, they can be reliably located within ruins. Players can find ruins scattered throughout the map, like those mentioned in the opening description. While it is possible to fabricate temporary structures and construct infrastructures inside or near the ruins, nothing can obscure them. All fabrications exposed in timefall are ephemeral, yet the ruins stand still. Identifying photographs of earthquake ruins in Japan as sublime, Gennifer Weisenfeld argues that “reconstruction would wipe away the conflicted memories embodied in ruins and replace them with a coherent commemorative narrative of the tragedy.”³⁷ Sublime ruins are stubborn reminders of what was lost, and the game's refusal to erase or replace them confirms that. The questions remain: what was lost, and how should we feel about it?

³⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Gennifer S. Weisenfeld, *Imaging Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan's Great Earthquake of 1923*, Asia: Local Studies/Global Themes 22 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 159.

Sublime Ruins

Japan's post-postwar modernity, punctuated with nuclear discourse, gives textures to the story of *Death Stranding*. A contemplation of nuclearity introduces the game:

Once there was an explosion, a bang which gave birth to time and space. Once there was an explosion, a bang which set a planet spinning in that space. Once there was an explosion, a bang which gave rise to life as we know it. And then, came the next explosion... an explosion that will be our last.

This monologue touches on nuclearity without direct reference and positions explosions as the start and end of life. Throughout the dissertation, I borrowed Yoshikuni Igarashi's "foundational narrative" to describe how postwar Japan, mainly in the 1960s, rationalized the atomic bombings as an inevitable and necessary evil that ended the imperial institution and gave rise to a modernized Japan.³⁸ The foundation narrative prohibits forms of remembrance that deviate from the values of the new nationhood.³⁹ Igarashi characterizes feelings towards the explosions, which hold the power to create and destroy, as "conflicting desire[s] both to remember and to forget its loss."⁴⁰ This duality is present in the above monologue, where explosions are both a blessing and a curse.

Igarashi's work focused on media produced immediately after the war, between 1945 and 1970. To understand how the ambivalent feelings developed, we can look to Anne Allison's *Precarious Japan*, in which she characterizes neoliberal Japan as the "post-

³⁸ Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: University Press, 2000), 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

postwar" era.⁴¹ Allison attributes societal issues, such as the rising rates of depression, suicide, and self-inflicted violence, to the economic downfall following "the high economic growth and a high level of job security for (male) workers in the 1970s to the 80s."⁴² Commenting on the need to be constantly productive, perpetuated by neoliberalist rhetoric of the miraculous postwar recovery, Allison highlights the lack of human ties in the face of precarity.⁴³ In addition to the disillusion of the postwar prosperity myth, Allison comments on how the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, causing the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, triggered "memories of Japan's victimization and vulnerability at the end of the Pacific War."⁴⁴

These resurfaced memories destabilized the foundational narrative in the form of anti-nuclear protests. Azumi Tamura studies these protests and details how the loss of lives and the government's failure to protect and inform the citizens "shattered people's belief that their lives would be stable if they stuck to the dominant norms."⁴⁵ Tamura argues that disasters reveal the fundamental fragility of lives, and only by connecting with others can we face the precarity with certainty.⁴⁶ The ambivalence for the

⁴¹ Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan*, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ Azumi Tamura, *Post-Fukushima Activism: Politics and Knowledge in the Age of Precarity* (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315157580>, 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

foundational narrative, anxiety towards precarity, and desire for human connections define post-postwar Japan, which is also the theme of *Death Stranding*.

Game Director Hideo Kojima is no stranger to weaving nuclear discourse into his games. Rachael Hutchinson finds Kojima's antiwar sentiment in his design interventions in the *Metal Gear Solid* series that deter players from creating and weaponizing nuclear weapons.⁴⁷ *Death Stranding* also makes anti-war messages by invoking the political sublime. Calum Lister Matheson uses the term "nuclear sublime" to describe images of nuclear waste and the impact craters because they "decenter humanity and disrupt the subject by revealing the vastness of the inhuman."⁴⁸ Two nuclear allegories in *Death Stranding* are the timefalls and "chiralium." Timefall describes the phenomenon where rainclouds absorb "chiral matter" and accelerate the passage of time for anything they touch. Chiralium comes from the place between life and death called the "Beach." When BTs move between the two realms, they leave behind crystalized chiral matter. Due to their links to the Beach and their anti-gravity property, scientists harvest and utilize chiralium to create the "chiral network" that unites the country. People use chiralium to create shelters, charging stations, rest stops, ziplines, and highways that would make delivery much safer and faster. Chiralium becomes the apparatus that physically, cybernetically, and

⁴⁷ Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*.

⁴⁸ Calum L. Matheson, *Desiring the Bomb: Communication, Psychoanalysis, and the Atomic Age, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2019), 20.

metaphorically unites the country. Like nuclear energy, the adoption of chiralium provokes a sense of ambivalence. It holds destructive powers but also provides a solution to what it has destroyed. Nuclear sublime shares sentiments with the political sublime as they shy away from the overwhelming spectacle of the mushroom cloud and point to the ruins.

Michael J. Shapiro highlights the political affordance of the sublime by identifying and synthesizing natural, racial, nuclear, industrial, and 9/11 terror sublime in *The Political Sublime*. Shapiro details how the sublime "lay siege to the institutionalized forms of quiescence and passivity that turn events into impregnable monuments."⁴⁹

Bring Shapiro and Igarashi together, it is easy to see how ruins in *Death Stranding* conjure the sublime to resist the impregnability of the foundational narrative. The Middle Knot City Ruins sit south of the most prominent visible crater, caused by thermonuclear bombing, on the map. The entire area showers in constant Timefall, signaling the presence of BTs (figure 4.3).

⁴⁹ Michael J. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime, Thought in the Act* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 172.



Figure 4.3. Encountering a BT in the ruins of Middle Knot City.

The mangled remains of buildings block the direct passage to the ruined shelter, which forces the player to path through the remains of a commercial structure. Excessive debris and loose steel frames clutter the space's interior, where roaming BTs await. Unlike the peaceful and pastoral landscape outside, the design of this area is chaotic and unsettling. The decaying interior becomes the stage of the sublime. The most noticeable aspect is the BTs, literal and figurative embodiments of haunting. Early concepts of the BTs are more abstract and aggressive looking, but according to the artists' notes, they decided to mold them from common animals and humans because the perversion of the familiar, or the uncanny, feels "scarier and compelling."⁵⁰ The sublime quality of these specters comes from their uncanniness

⁵⁰ Kojima Productions, *The Art of Death Stranding* (London: Titan Books, 2020), 126.

and lamenting gestures – as if they are constantly in mourning. Freeman’s feminine sublime, characterized by mourning and haunting, signals the irrepresentability of historical trauma due to their sheer scale and depth. Unmetabolized historical traumas come back in the form of ghosts in literature and art to overwhelm the beholder's senses and force them to witness the absence they symbolize. While Morrison's sublime is concerned with the trauma associated with slavery, *Death Stranding* conjures BTs to embody nuclear power through sublimity. These ruins are memorial sites that refuse to become what Shapiro calls, “impregnable monuments” because indignant ghosts of the past insist you reconsider any concluding narrative.

Staging the Sublime

I find the visual parallels between ruins in *Death Stranding* and photographed remains of nuclear explosions compelling. Stanley Troutman, one of the first American journalists to document the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, captured the sublime indignity of the atomic bombings. Troutman favors images of a singular figure amid debris and refuse of the war. One of his most iconic images depicts a figure facing the blasted skeletons of the former Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, now the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, or, more commonly, the A-bomb dome (figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4. One of Troutman's iconic frames taken in Hiroshima one month after the bombing.

Due to the abundance of photographs capturing the aftermath of the Fukushima incident, no image is as influential as that of Troutman's work in Hiroshima. But it is intriguing to see players drawing similarities between the game and the incident. One Reddit user points out the similar themes and visual languages between the game and the real event. They present an image of a man in white overall walking solemnly in the debris of the earthquake, with the *Death Stranding* title photoshopped in it, to persuade others (figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5. Noticing the visual and narrative parallels between the game and the Fukushima nuclear incident, one Reddit user uses this image to suggest *Death Stranding* as an homage to the real events.

Ignoring the eerie similarities between these photos and Friedrich's *Wanderer* is difficult. Like the painting, we see a masculine-coded subject confronting the incomprehensible reality. The crowded environmental details highlight the isolation of the subject, and the bombarded building skeleton forms a dreadfully somber relationship with him. The framing and the contrast with the hazy sky further enhance the excessiveness of the debris. Unlike the *Wanderer*, however, these images promise no transcendence but create a space for reflection and mourning. The ruins of *Death Stranding* evoke the sublime through excessive debris, shattered infrastructure, and haunting BTs. Yet the game is also about finding rescue in human connections to prevail over the imminent threat of extinction.

Episode 3: Fragile firmly establishes the sublime as an aesthetic condition of the ruins and the traumatized bodies of those living in the perpetually apocalyptic world: Fragile's backstory and the history of the thermonuclear bombings. Even though Timefall and Voidout are perfect allegories of lingering nuclear fallout and nuclear explosions, *Death Stranding* includes direct references to nuclear bombs in the narrative. Fragile, played by Léa Seydoux, runs the namesake delivery company, and works closely with a man named Higgs Monaghan, played by Troy Baker. Higgs learns the certainty of the imminent extinction event and decides to accelerate human extinction by smuggling a thermonuclear bomb via Fragile Express into Middle Knot City. The bomb kills most residents in the city, and the lingering BTs instigates several voidouts that effectively eliminate the remaining surviving population. The ruins of Middle Knot City discussed earlier remain a sublime reminder of the attack, which alludes to the parallel bombings in 1945. The only two differences here are that, in an almost cathartic manner, the first fictional bombing takes place in the United States, and the effect of the second bombing is transferred to Fragile's body. Realizing Higgs' plan, Fragile intercepts the second bomb before it arrives in South Knot City. Higgs captures Fragile and forces her to choose between teleporting away to safety using her unique ability or mitigating the explosion by throwing the bomb into a tar lake near the city, except she must do so running naked in the Timefall. Higgs then puts a mask on her face because he wants people to remember her as the culprit of the bombing of the Middle Knot City, while her heroic sacrifice remains

unknown to the people she saved. Determined to save the city, Fragile runs with the suitcase containing the bomb while her body deteriorated in the Timefall (figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6. Fragile's body deteriorates in the Timefall as she cradles the suitcase containing a thermonuclear bomb.

Amy Green ruminates on Fragile's remarks that she cradles the bomb "like a child" and comments on her choice between assuming the role of a mother or a destroyer.⁵¹ Green expands on Fragile's motherly sacrifice by pointing out the parallel between Fragile's withered body and the decaying bomb sites.⁵² Reading Green's analysis in the historical context, we can understand Fragile's body as a site of nuclear discourse. Instead of letting the second nuclear explosion occur, her body becomes the stand-in for the symbolic second atomic bombing in August 1945. James Orr examines

⁵¹ Green, *Longing, Ruin, and Connection in Hideo Kojima's Death Stranding*, 62.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 63.

Japan's postwar victimhood and argues that "Japanese pacifism and its supporting construction of the war experience came to rely on an image of self as victim" while downplaying the "consciousness of self as victimizer."⁵³

Fragile's resilience echoes postwar Japan's affinity for endurance and perseverance, and her hatred for Higgs resonates with the unaddressed anguish towards the perpetrators of the war, the leaders of Imperial Japan and the United States. Her characterization confirms that the correct interpretation of her name is the act of diligently and delicately handing fragile packages, not the literal meaning of easy-to-break. Fragile's catchphrase – "I am Fragile, but I am not that fragile," further illustrates her embodied qualities. She ends her story with a request for Sam to capture Higgs and implies that she would kill him for revenge. In the end, however, she decides against killing him. Their final confrontation satisfies Fragile's need for revenge but allows her to move forward without a guilty conscience.

Fragile, as an oblivious accomplice in the first bombing, echoes the sentiment that the Japanese people do not have the power to overturn the war crimes committed by the state and the military. Her contradictory role as the hero and the victim points to the ambivalence of the foundational narrative, and her deteriorated body symbolizes the

⁵³ James Joseph Orr, *Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu, HI, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 3.

trauma of enduring cruel and unnecessary punishment. In many ways, Fragile's body is another instance of sublime ruin.

Encountering the Sublime

Sam, like Fragile, also bears traumatic markings. In addition to visual evidence of hard labor, Sam's body is covered with handprints, which indicates the number of his repatriations or how many times he has died. One of Sam's repatriations was caused by the suicide of his wife. Her death triggered a Voidout, which took away their child along with the entire city. Sam became the sole survivor, and his inability to die forced him to live with the traumatic memories. If Fragile's story echoes postwar Japan's ambivalence towards the war, Sam's story contemplates the meaning of survival under precarious conditions of the future. Sam's immortality compels him to live in a perpetually apocalyptic world where he must struggle through the consequences of those who came before him. Sam's doomed fate of existing alongside constant disasters mirrors the precarity in post-postwar Japan.

The post-postwar subjectivity is constructed through the aesthetics of Sam's labor and body, marked by hard labor and traumatic haunting. *Death Stranding* explores the nuclear discourse through Fragile's backstory, reiterating her positionality through play. Players must repeat Fragile's past to progress the story as Higgs attempts another thermonuclear attack on South Knot City. The player must travel through the ruins outside the city and toss the bomb inside the tar lake, just like Fragile did before.

At this point in the story, the player is familiar with the danger of this ruin through another quest described in the paper's opening. The ruin sits in the center of a natural basin, which also hosts a giant Voidout crater filled with tar. The volcanic terrain enclosing the basin renders the area difficult to access without proper transportation methods or expensive infrastructure. These design choices ensure the complexity of this task for most players. Compared to the game's banal or pastoral environments, this ruin stands out as it contains several carefully curated clusters of excessive debris. The case containing the bombing is fragile, which means the player must not drop or damage it while navigating the two risky routes. The player might enter the tar lake through the North, which contains numerous spiky rock formations, or the Southwest, infested with BTs. Through plotting the safest route, managing Sam's movement, and avoiding a hazardous environment against a ticking timer, play becomes a shared labor between the player, Sam, and Fragile. This shared positionality encourages the player to ruminate about the past presented by Fragile as they experience uncanny fear through Sam.

Uncanny fear is a notable expression of the sublime, prominently featured in what could be argued as the precursor to *Death Stranding – PT*. *PT*, short for "playable teaser," was planned to be published by Konami as a new installment of the horror game series *Silent Hills* (1996 - 2014). Hideo Kojima directed *PT* in collaboration with Guillermo del Toro but did not complete development, possibly due to Kojima

ending his tenure at Konami.⁵⁴ Matthew Spokes argues that encounters in *PT* successfully stage the sublime because "it makes it increasingly hard to reconcile which is familiar and which is not."⁵⁵ I argued earlier that *Death Stranding* understands that the sublime is most potent when the subject is jolted from familiar territories. Design details such as controlled player agency and the constant threat of hostile apparitions in *PT* are prominently featured in the encounter described earlier. It can be argued that *PT* serves as a blueprint for provoking uncanny fear, and the story of *Death Stranding* gives that fear a historical texture. Through encountering BTs in ruins, the player is encouraged to sit with the uncanny fear and perhaps contemplate the unmetabolized and contradicting feelings in post-postwar Japan.

Gender, Body, and Labor

Fragile's body is a site of nuclear discourse that functionally resonates with Aerith's body, as I observed in Chapter 3. *Death Stranding* textures the landscape and the bodies of its inhabitants with post-postwar ambivalence on the past and anxieties toward the future. Through the sublime, I explain the perpetually apocalyptic setting of the fictional world, where calamity bubbles under banality, waiting to erupt. *Death Stranding* presents the ethics of existing in this world through a quote by modernist writer Kōbō Abe, an intellectual pacifist who lived through WWII. The quote is from

⁵⁴ Daley Wilhelm, "The Real Reason Konami Killed P.T.," SVG, September 13, 2019, <https://www.svg.com/166177/the-real-reason-konami-killed-p-t/>.

⁵⁵ Spokes, *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime*, 117.

a short story titled *Nawa*, or “The Rope.” The game’s opening sequence juxtaposes the quote with director Kojima’s monologue about explosions.

‘The Rope’ and ‘The Stick,’ together, are one of humankind’s oldest ‘tools.’ ‘The Stick’ is for keeping evil away; ‘The Rope’ is for pulling good toward us; these are the first friends the human race invented. Wherever you find humans, ‘The Rope’ and ‘The Stick’ also exist.”

The stick and the rope are aspects of building communities. The dichotomy echoes the difference between the sublime and the beautiful: “Where the sublime is a divisive force, encouraging feelings of difference and deference, the beautiful encourages a spirit of unity and harmony.”⁵⁶ The monologue mentioned earlier immediately illustrates the danger of the stick through a meditation on explosions. The monologue aligns the stick with explosions, with the sublime power to create and destroy life, and conjures up Japan’s nuclear discourse. Instead of valorizing the stick, *Death Stranding* presents the rope as the ethics of living in a precarious world through gameplay mechanics, metaphors, and narratives focusing on interpersonal and familial ties. In other words, the rope means connection. The primary task of transcontinental unification underscores the significance of community building to struggle against future precarity. Names such as Bridget, Bridges, and Strand all imply ties. BT’s umbilical cord mirrors the mechanical link between the BB and its user. Reading the rope from the differentiation of the sublime and the beautiful creates a framework I use to explain the game’s gendered engagement with precarity.

⁵⁶ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, Second edition., The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 12.

Almost every non-playable cast member's story ponders human ties' positive and negative aspects. For instance, a scientist named Heartman (modeled after director Nicolas Winding Refn and voiced by Darren Jacobs) attempts to find his deceased family members by repeatedly killing and reviving himself so that he can travel through different beaches. Another example is Mama and her twin sister, Lockne (played by Margaret Qualley), co-creators of the chiral network. Mama designs the technical infrastructure of the network, while Lockne is responsible for its software. Their twin status adds to the rope metaphor and their conflict centers around a break in their tie. When Sam first meets Mama, Mama is self-imprisoned next to a cave-in, visible through a giant window. We later learn that the cave-in results from the attack responsible for the ruins outside South Knot City. Lockne cannot bear children, so Mama offers to be her twin sister's surrogate. While in labor, the hospital collapses thanks to the voidout caused by the attack, and she becomes trapped. Her child dies upon birth but is linked to her as a BT. The pair allows each other to exist because they stand on each side of life and death, and the baby's cry allows rescuers to locate Mama. Mama is afraid to tell her sister about the baby's death and Lockne mistakenly thinks that her sister has stolen her child. The player must resolve their conflict by severing the tie between the BT baby and Mama and escorting Mama to Lockne before Mama dies. The twin's story ruminates on individual and collective grief caused by the stick and is made compelling through parenthood.

Parenthood plays a crucial role in the story and gameplay. Though Sam's BB is introduced as equipment, Sam grows to care and eventually names her after his last

child, whom he lost, Lou. By gently rocking the controller back and forth, the player can soothe Sam's BB when her mood worsens due to BT encounters or travel mishaps. The motion creates a soothing motion of the container, which calms the BB. These nurturing acts and the umbilical cord attachment give Sam's body a queer sensibility as he carries out maternal and paternal duties. The queer sensibility challenges the mechanical function of the BB and Sam, who used to be a BB, by defining the meaning of life not through its value to society but through familiar bonds with people regardless of bloodline.

Parenthood is the most pronounced expression of the rope and functions as the game's central conflict. Death Stranding is a story about the relationship between Sam and Bridget. Bridget Strand (played by Lindsay Wagner and Emily O'Brien) was diagnosed with uterine cancer in her twenties. Her body and soul separated during surgery, which created two versions of Bridget. Her body lives on in the material world as Bridget, and her soul lingers in the afterlife, the Beach, as Amelie. Bridget/Amelie began to experience prophetic visions about an imminent extinction event called "Death Stranding" and understood her role as a harbinger of the end. Initially wishing to stop the apocalypse, Bridget created several initiatives, which include the BB and the chiral network. Bridget persuaded Sam's father to donate his wife and son's bodies for research, which made Sam the first BB. Sam's father came to regret his decision and decided to escape with Sam. During the escape attempt, Bridget accidentally shot Sam's father and accidentally killed Sam in the process. Sam's soul showed up on the Beach where Amelie found him and returned him to the

world of the living, which resulted in Sam's immortality. Feeling remorse for her actions, Bridget decommissioned Sam and adopted him as her child. Sam experienced death several times as he grew up, but unlike others, he could not pass on and became trapped on the Beach. Amelie would guide Sam back to life just like the player does whenever Sam dies in the game. Sam idolizes Amelie without knowing she is a part of his adopted mother. Though Sam and Amelie's relationship is never characterized as sexual, it is sometimes remarked by other characters as romantic. Sam's complicated relationship with Bridget/Amelie makes her the mother figure and an object of desire, which is illustrated further at the start of the main story.

Bridget begs Sam to conduct transcontinental unification on her deathbed, which makes Sam a conduit of the rope. To incentivize Sam, Bridget tells Sam that "her daughter" Amelie is the next president of the United States, and he must rescue her from her captivity in the West. The game remarks on the stereotypically simple and somewhat sexist objective in a confrontation between Sam and Amelie later in the story, where Sam compares himself to Mario and Bridget to Princess Peach. Bridget and Amelie mark the start and end of Sam's journey, but instead of obtaining the object of desire, Amelie is the final confrontation Sam must face. Amelie is "Bowser," a monster who often acts as the final boss in the Mario series, disguised as Princess Peach. When Bridget/Amelie realizes that she cannot prevent the apocalypse, she decides to use the chiral network to precipitate the end and shorten human suffering. Sam discovers Bridget/Amelie's identity as the story progresses. One of the first hints comes in Sam's dreams, where he finds Amelie wearing a mask

worn by the terrorist. Amelie confesses to Sam that she is the extinction entity and points him to a giant version of her walking from the ocean to the beach. The titanic statue of Amelie summons earlier depictions of giant BTs Sam encountered throughout the game and implies Amelie's sublime power as the harbinger of the end, or Extinction Entity (figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7. Sam dreams about Amelie confessing to be the Extinction Entity and appears as a giant woman.

Echoing my analysis of Lilith/Rei in Chapter 2, Bridget/Amelie combines the sublime and the beautiful as she is once a nurturing figure who suddenly reveals her overwhelming power. As a monstrous feminine mother figure, Bridget/Amelie violates the lines between life and death, masculine and feminine, desire and disgust. Her femininity serves to construct Sam's identity and defines his masculinity. The game ends with two options of confronting Amelie. To stop Amelie, who is about to bring on the final extinction, the player can let Sam shoot or hug her, choosing between the stick and the rope. Shooting her will result in the "bad ending:" Death stranding occurs immediately, and the screen goes white, followed by thundering sounds of explosion. Hugging Amelie will remind her of the importance of the human bond and that coming together is the solution to rebel against the unavoidable end.

Bridget meditates on her role as the harbinger of extinction:

... I'm starting to think that extinction might be the key to overcoming total annihilation. It forces life to fight to survive. To endure. To exist. That's why the Big Five (Extinction Events) ultimately rekindled life instead of extinguishing it. From the ashes of the dead rise the living—stronger and wiser... They defy the universe and refuse to surrender... Extinction is an opportunity.

The metaphor of a new generation of humanity rising from the ashes resonates with the foundational narrative, which the game has been pushing back through sublime ruins and encounters. It gives our current world in crisis a productive outlook by situating human connections as salvation. This conclusion resonates with post-war Japan's need for what Tamura calls non-hegemonic knowledge that "affirms the dignity of all lives by connecting with them and creating new values together with

them."⁵⁷ Extrapolating, or perhaps implicitly influenced by, the Japanese experience and universalizing it into a globally acceptable story, *Death Stranding* proposes human connection as the salvation to the alienated world in crises. Amelie's conclusion flirts with ableist ideologies where only the strong and intelligent can survive, which is antithetical to the game's empathetic call to action. This ending frames Amelie as a sublime threat, and Sam's reaction to her confirms his identity as the world's savior, which adheres to the romantic conceptions of the sublime. Despite its thematic relevance, the hopeful ending feels out of place when considering the game's preoccupation with living with precarity.

Death Stranding is not a representation of lived experiences but a retelling that strikes the same emotional chord provoked by images and stories from the past. The sublime ruins and encounters in *Death Stranding* resist the foundational narrative by representing unmetabolized and contradictory feelings towards nuclear power, which still reverberates in post-postwar Japan. The virtual ruins embrace all contradictions and liberate and prevent their beholders from concluding on the past, the present, or the future. The sublime ruins and bodies in the game challenge the necessity of strength and reject institutionalized narratives about collective trauma. Instead of its narrative ending, dwelling in the pastoral landscape and encountering the sublime within ruins more appropriately captures living with precarity.

⁵⁷ Tamura, *Post-Fukushima Activism: Politics and Knowledge in the Age of Precarity*, 203.

The contradiction between Amelie's final thesis and the politics of the game's landscape and bodies creates a melancholic contemplation on the meaning of life. This melancholy reveals that breaking down irrepresentable trauma into moral lessons is impossible. Bridget/Amelie's duality as the sublime and the beautiful invites the player to share a co-emerging relationship with precarity, anchored in Japan's wartime trauma and post-postwar precarity, simply by gazing upon her.

CHAPTER 5: Sublime Objects

A fold appears in the center of Tokyo and twists everything around it. Reality bends around the fold while it strips the vibrant city of color. From the depth of the chasm, a giant translucent man surfaces while joyfully announces his rebirth. Detective Konakawa, researcher Dr. Shima, and psychoanalyst Paprika recognize this giant man as Chairman Inui, who abuses a dream machine called the DC Mini to command dreams and reality by obliterating the uncrossable line between the two. Chairman Inui stands above Tokyo's city skyline, composed of illustrations and photographs of Tokyo, and proclaims his self-determined divine duty to free the world from imperfections and impurities. Once a disabled man in a wheelchair, the giant Inui stomps on Tokyo. Inui's ableist views on his body and the world explain his self-proclaimed divine duty: "To bring order to everything, I shall fill all the lacks at once." As Inui covers the world in darkness to create a new order, Paprika cheerfully turns to Konakawa and Shima with a riddle, "light and shadow, reality and dream, life, and death, so man and?" Shima and Konakawa reply with a hint of confusion, "woman?" Paprika chuckles, "And you add the missing spice..." Konakawa and Shima reply together, "Paprika!"

Satisfied with their answer, Paprika jumps into a husk, from which a translucent baby emerges. The baby ingests the darkness created by Inui as she grows into a toddler and then into a girl. Realizing the girl is eating his dreams, Inui presses his hand on her head to stop her. Not threatened by Inui, the girl absorbs Inui's hand, and soon

Inui himself. Finally, after eating the fold, the translucent girl grows into a solid giant woman. She bears a striking resemblance to Chiba instead of her alter ego, Paprika. This giant woman saves the world by returning dream objects to dreams and reverting the dark sky to its formal brilliance. As she fades away, the world returns to normalcy (figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1. Paprika becomes a translucent child, grows into a giant woman by consuming Inui and the fold, and eventually returns the world to normalcy.

This sequence is the climax of Satoshi Kon's 1997 film, *Paprika*. The feminine figure is the final giant woman at the end of the world that I will examine in this dissertation. Instead of a harbinger of the end, she saves the world in a *deus ex machina* fashion. To understand how she differs from and echoes her peers, I must contextualize her role in the perpetually apocalyptic setting, an allegory of post-postwar Japan.

I have demonstrated how disasters and traumatic events give texture to the perpetually apocalyptic settings and stories and the role gender plays in those reflections in previous chapters.

This chapter continues an examination of the conditions of the perpetually apocalyptic world that is post-postwar Japan but shift the focus away from events that contributed to the sense of precarity and toward the peril of neoliberalism and late capitalism. I detailed the lost era in Chapter 1, and it is vital to restate its characteristics as context for the film. The lost era has many names and aligns with the *Heisei* period (1989-2019). A new era of loss emerges, characterized by demographic and economic stagnations, as postwar Japan's prosperity myth halts, intensified by the asset bubble bursting. The sense of precarity was brought to the surface when the Japanese government failed to address the preventable financial crises and reacted unreliably to the Kobe Earthquake and Tokyo Sarin Gas attack in 1995. The lost decade extends into decades as Japan struggled to keep up with its exponential growth of the 70s and 80s and the emergence of economic powers like China.

The production and budget of Kon's first film, *Perfect Blue* (1997), was affected by the Kobe Earthquake.¹ Along with the lingering horror of the sarin gas attack, I speculate that a story about a young woman struggling to find stability in herself and

¹ Andrew Osmond, *Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist* (Berkeley, Calif: Stone Bridge Press, 2009).

her surroundings would resonate with the domestic audience at the time. *Paprika* (2006), Kon's last, extends an individual's anxiety towards precarity to the collective and questions the role of media as a temporary escape from precarity. However, I hesitate to position Kon as an auteur, especially given that his works are highly collaborative and adaptations of existing novels. I believe a preoccupation with modern living through animation while simultaneously critiquing the medium unifies his work.

There is a certain magic to Kon's work. Paul Wells reflects on Kon's legacy and utilizes "magic realism" as a thread to explore the director's use of animation to respond to "hopelessness and disillusion at the heart of the more apocalyptic agendas of the Japanese post-war sensibility."² Wells frames Kon's work as ciphers for Japan's modernity, each responding to different aspects of modern living and relationships to history.³ Desire, exhaustion, and anxieties of modern living are thematic lynchpins of Satoshi Kon's oeuvre. Kon's idiosyncrasy is easily locatable in his editing choices, particularly in his composition of montages. Kon adeptly leverages creative cuts to disrupt the linearity of time and space and to blur the line between fantasy and reality. In *Perfect Blue* (1997), the final chase sequence between the protagonist and her murderous alter ego juxtaposes the clumsiness of reality and the buoyancy of fantasy

² Paul Wells, "Playing the Kon Trick: Between Dates, Dimensions and Daring in the Films of Satoshi Kon," *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 4–8, <https://doi.org/10.14288/cinephile.v7i1.197974>.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

through the seamless transitions between the alter ego, a fantasy construct, and Rumi, the woman who is controlling and being controlled by the alter ego.

Millennium Actress (2001) shows the protagonist Chiyoko running through time in her different roles in stories set across a millennium. In a montage showcasing her career throughout various genres of films, we see a wipe, a fade, and a match cut work together to suggest the historical changes around Chiyoko. In another sequence, Chiyoko chases after a boy, and it is unclear whether she is running in real life or movies, as the montage intersects fiction with memory. Tony Zhou publishes thoughtful video essays about filmmaking on YouTube under the channel "Every Frame a Painting". One popular video titled "Satoshi Kon - Editing Space & Time" details how Kon's editing style challenges the audience's perception by implying one thing through a context, followed by an immediate subversion of that thing using another cut.⁴ Zhou highlights the fluidity of animation as a medium and Kon's mobilization of such fluidity to blend reality with fiction.⁵ The blend between reality and fiction gives Kon's work a sense of magic. Journalist Andrew Osmond, who interviewed Kon extensively, designated Kon an illusionist in his book, *Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist*. In an interview, Kon told Osmond that producer Taro Maki compared *Perfect Blue* to a *trompe l'oeil*, a French painting technique that seeks to trick the

⁴ *Satoshi Kon - Editing Space & Time*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz49vQwSoTE>.

⁵ Ibid.

eye.⁶ As an illusionist, Kon adopts the *trompe l'oeil* effect to unsettle, bewilder, and enchant the audience.

Though Kon's iconic montages are ever-changing, a feminine figure always serves as the anchor and swings effortlessly with the changes. Kon attributes his affinity for female protagonists to the metaphoric property of femininity. "With a male character, I can only see the bad aspects," Kon said, "I don't know (women) the way I know a male; I can project my obsession onto the characters and expand the aspects I want to describe."⁷ Osmond followed up on Kon's comment, to which Kon responded that he is not talking about women as ontological entities. Still, the women in his works are the "essence" of his "spirit," and each character reflects his internal struggles during the production of the respective film.⁸ To borrow one of Jacques Lacan's most infamous phrases, "A woman is a symptom of man." Each woman protagonist helps Kon work through certain parts of himself. Kon draws a picture of his career from the anxious young entertainer Mima to the seasoned actress Chiyoko. The misfits in *Tokyo Godfathers*, overworking workers, and overzealous consumers in *Paranoia Agent* shape the anxiety and loneliness of modern living.

It is most fitting for *Paprika* to feature a dream psychoanalyst who helps the men around her realize their un-lived potential. In defense of Lacan's woman as a symptom,

⁶ Osmond, *Satoshi Kon*, 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

Slavoj Žižek articulates the function of femininity for men's identity through textual analysis of masculine identity formulated in film noir.⁹ Žižek argues that women in this genre, such as the femme fatale, reveal a lack in men, "she is just a consequence, a result, a materialization of man's fall."¹⁰ Žižek presents one interpretation of Lacan's theorization that a man's ontological consistency depends on externalizing his symptoms onto the woman.¹¹ In this logic, men require women to exist. Provocatively, Žižek asserts that women, like the femme fatale, do not require men to exist because their ontological consistency is independent of men.¹² Žižek's assertion fails to address that film noir is not concerned with the ontological experience of the femme fatale. Furthermore, Sarah Herbold cites Teresa de Laurentis to frame Žižek's configuration of femininity as "transhistorical" because he fails to distinguish between women as a fictional construct and real historical beings.¹³ Real women cannot easily emulate a femme fatale's power without negative social consequences. The fantasy of the femme fatale speaks directly to the patriarchal assumptions about the unknown. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Kon's woman protagonists serve as an anchor, a mirror, and a symptom.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 176.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹² *Ibid.*, 177.

¹³ Sarah Herbold, "Well-Placed Reflections: (Post)Modern Woman as Symptom of (Post)Modern Man," *Signs* 21, no. 1 (1995): 83–115, 83.

Overview of Kon's Oeuvre

Kon's oeuvre spans several genres and traditions, yet most scholars discuss them in connection with each other. Notably, scholars, critics, and journalists, including Osmond, have positioned *Millennium Actress* and *Perfect Blue* as two sides of a coin. To understand why Kon's preoccupation with the precarity of modern living resonated with domestic and global audiences, I follow the women in his works. In his final feature-length film, *Paprika*, we see a woman growing into a skyscraper who swallows dreams to return the world to normalcy. But before I can deconstruct this giant woman at the end of the world, I will first examine the feminine heroines in his previous films.

I want to highlight the entanglement between women in Kon's work and the exhaustion of modern living. Modern Japan, like any other late-capitalist state, prioritizes efficiency above all else; exhaustion is the byproduct of overworking. A neoliberal individual sees oneself as a project that requires constant optimization, leading to exhaustion. Byung-Chul Han argues that the neoliberal market provides exhausted individuals with consumable solutions and the illusion of control.¹⁴ Instead of overturning the requirement for constant optimization through systemic restructuring, a neoliberal market provides consumable healing as temporary solutions, such as idols in *Perfect Blue*. While Han's observations are based on the

¹⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 45.

overabundance of products capitalizing on the concepts of self-help and healing in the United States in the 2010s, modern Japan is no stranger to market solutions to the exhaustion caused by the very same market.

Kon's works are hyperaware of anime as a medium, a consumer product, and a critical engagement with popular culture, most evident in their fandom or otaku culture depictions. Following the varying representations of the fan figure in Kon's oeuvre, Kerin Ogg articulates Kon's complicated relationship with otaku culture.¹⁵ Zealous fans often play a childish, isolated, and delusional role in Kon's work, and sometimes their database consumption behaviors, such as retaliating against those who pose a threat to their fetishized object, render them dangerous.¹⁶ However, the fan character is sometimes instrumental in resolving the plot's major conflict through their unique perspective.¹⁷ Ogg argues that what differentiates a "good" fan from a "bad" one is the ability to "never (or rarely) let the real world sink below the horizon of their interests."¹⁸ In other words, Kon is not critical of one's passion for art but the reliance on "database consumption" as a form of salvation.

Thinking in similar registers, Alice Teodorescu places Kon's work within a postmodernist context by identifying "the modular" and "the database" as characteristics of Kon's work that employ non-linear storytelling and editing

¹⁵ Kerin Ogg, "Lucid Dreams, False Awakenings: Figures of the Fan in Satoshi Kon," *Mechademia* 5 (2010): 157–74, 160.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

idiosyncrasies.¹⁹ Expanding Allan Cameron's work on modular and database narrative, which refers to directorial interventions that disrupt linearity in time and space, Teodorescu brings in Mark Fisher's capitalist realism to explore identity construction through Kon's *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika*.²⁰ Teodorescu identifies the modular narrative as a form of production and proposes the database as a form of consumption through Hiroki Azuma's definition of database consumption.²¹

In his book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, Azuma identifies a pattern of anime consumption, coining it "database consumption," that prioritizes the transmedial reproduction and circulation of appealing character designs and other non-narrative elements over the story, ideology, setting, and character development.²² Teodorescu synthesizes discourse around the modular and the database to reveal that identity under capitalism is fragmented and infinitely plastic.²³ Teodorescu demonstrates the plasticity and multiplicity of identity through *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika*. Both films address the anxieties of modern living through the internal struggles of the woman protagonist, who loses control of their alter ego. Framing their alter ego as "modular subjectivity," Teodorescu skillfully unveils the "contemporary anxiety of the liquid

¹⁹ Alice Teodorescu, "Blurring the Screen: The Fragmented Self, the Database, and the Narratives of Satoshi Kon," *Ekphrasis. Images, Cinema, Theory, Media* 15, no. 1 (2016): 63–74, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²² Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, [English ed.]. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 181.

²³ Teodorescu, "Blurring the Screen." 64.

self."²⁴ The alter egos in these two films, an idol, and a psychoanalyst, leverage their femininity to ease others' anxieties.

Perfect Blue follows Mima's transition from a pop idol to an actor. Becoming aware of her fading youth, the most crucial marker of an idol, Mima decides to try acting. Mima's agent advises her to graduate from her idol persona by partaking in nude photoshoots and sexually charged scenes as a symbolic farewell to her innocent idol persona. During the filming of a graphic rape scene, Mima experiences cognitive dissonance as she fails to balance reality with fantasy, and eventually causes the idol persona to materialize as an illusory doppelganger, a mirror image, and leaves Mima behind. Teodorescu argues that Mima's cognitive dissonance is a product of "modular subjectivity" as she is forced to choose between an innocent idol and a sexually available actress.²⁵ The film follows the idol doppelganger retaliating against people responsible for tarnishing her innocence.

I have argued elsewhere that *Perfect Blue* uses a psychoanalytic framework to highlight the entanglement between neoliberalism and the patriarchal subconscious.²⁶ Framing the concept of innocence, which the idol embodies and upholds, as a commodity and the idol as a neoliberal project, I examined the metaphoric function of femininity as an escapist fantasy that still upholds neoliberal principles.²⁷ Idols are

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

²⁵ Ibid., 70.

²⁶ Yasheng She, "A Cure for Woundless Pain: Consumption of Innocence in Japanese Idol Culture," October 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.00072.she>.

²⁷ Ibid.

"work-in-progress," young entertainers who have not yet reached the level of professionals (though such a definition has changed with the professionalization of pop idol groups), which allows them to gesture toward endless possibilities symbolically.

Perfect Blue opens with a child-oriented live performance in a park, which features a group of superheroes fighting against a villain. Once the show ends, adult men waiting for the idol group CHAM quickly fill the seats. Superheroes and idols cater to different demographics, but both address the underlying patriarchal anxiety about adulthood. The superhero performance inspires children with masculine ideals of adulthood. In contrast, the idol performance comforts the disillusioned adults with innocent feminine figures designed to fulfill the wasted potential by proxy through fan activity.

Millennium Actress, released at the start of a new millennium, offers a reparative reading of the entertainment industry by following an aging actress recounting her career to a documentarian who is also her zealous fan. Actress Chiyoko tells the documentarian Genya that her career has been a chase for a boy she met and lost during the war. She appears in different movies, hoping she will be reunited with him again. Sadly, Chiyoko never finds the nameless boy. When Genya asks her about her failed attempt at reunion, Chiyoko drifts into her final role of an astronaut. Instead of saying her lines, Chiyoko looks directly into the camera and responds that she loves not the boy but herself, constantly chasing after him.

The film is medium-aware as Chiyoko's story is presented through a barrage of motifs from films such as George Will Roy's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972) and domestic classics like *Kimi no na ha* (1953). Melek Ortabasi concentrates on the film's visual intertextuality and articulates how the film indexes Japanese history through references to Akira Kurosawa's and Yasujirō Ozu's films.²⁸ In another article, Ortabasi uses the parallel between Chiyoko's fiction career and her real-life cinematic counterparts to tease out the nationalistic undertone of the film.²⁹

Millennium Actress remediates Japanese history and creates a distance to that history through the feminine figure whose motivation to be in films, even propaganda, has nothing to do with nationalism. By illustrating Chiyoko's involvement with propaganda films produced in wartime Manchukuo and postwar Godzilla-esque kaiju cinema, Kon documents the evolving Japanese cinema while creating a distance to that complicated history through Chiyoko's innocent motivations. Ortabasi lingers on Chiyoko's femininity and argues that the film is not about her but the men who watch her, namely the otaku.³⁰ Adding to Ortabasi, Janine M. Villot highlights anime's

²⁸ Melek Ortabasi, "Indexing the Past: Visual Language and Translatability in Satoshi Kon's *Millennium Actress*," *Perspectives, Studies in Translatology* 14, no. 4 (2007): 278–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09076760708669044>, 279.

²⁹ Melek Ortabasi, "National History as Otaku Fantasy: Satoshi Kon's *Millennium Actress*," in *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World Of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams (London ; Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315703152>, 277.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

ability to remediate films and memory to add to the cultural discourse around Japan's history.³¹

Unlike Kon's other work, *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) is not an immediate darling to the audience. The story follows three homeless people: a transwoman named Hana, an alcoholic man named Gin, and a teenage runaway named Miyuki. The trio finds a baby amidst a mountain of trash and returns the baby through a series of Christmas miracles. Breaking away from the pains of modern living, *Tokyo Godfathers* locates joy in the margins of society, within communities of people expelled from normalcy. Inspired by John Ford's *3 Godfathers* (1948), *Tokyo Godfathers* is an urban fairytale that is brutally honest with the treatment of social misfits and optimistically themed through the heroic journey of the trio. Responding to a popular reception of the film's lack of magical realism in comparison to Kon's other works, Casper Bruun Jensen, Euan Auld, and Steven D. Brown argue that the film "explores the proliferating modes of existence of the many living" through its transitions from different worlds and realities that the characters experience.³²

Adding to their observation, Barbara E. Thornbury sees a film as a window into the reality of being a "foreign" outsider inside Tokyo.³³ While praising the film's positive

³¹ Janine M. Villot, "Chasing the Millennium Actress," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 7, no. 3 (2014): 343–64, 362.

³² Casper Bruun Jensen, Euan Auld, and Steven D. Brown, "In the Forest of Virtuals: The Modes of Existence in Tokyo Godfathers," *Mechademia* 15, no. 1 (2022): 15–33, 27.

³³ Barbara E. Thornbury, "Locating the Outsider Inside Tokyo," in *Mapping Tokyo in Fiction and Film*, ed. Barbara E. Thornbury, Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies (Cham:

portrayals of marginalized people, Thornbury underscores the urban fairytale full of miracles that contrast painfully to the lived realities of marginalized people.³⁴ Susan Napier also argues that by showing triumph and joy through a marginalized but unified community, the film spotlights "the loneliness and fragmentation of contemporary Japan."³⁵ Two of the trio are women and their femininity rebels against traditions. Hana, a transwoman, takes on the motherly role, whereas Miyuki, a runaway, takes care of the baby like a big sister. With Gin, the trio becomes a queer family that challenges Japan's heteronormativity.

Continuing the conversation about the peril of modern living, *Paranoid Agent* is an urban legend about a monster who puts people in a coma. Chris Perkins invokes monster theory to examine modern anxieties manifested as the bat-wielding youngster Shōnen Batto and the cut but eerie doll Maromi in *Paranoia Agent*.³⁶ Perkins aligns monsters like Godzilla with the historical moment that summoned them to demonstrate their cathartic and escapist function.³⁷

Springer International Publishing, 2020), 129–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34276-0_5, 139.

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

³⁵ Susan J. Napier, "From Spiritual Fathers to Tokyo Godfathers: Depictions of the Family in Japanese Animation," in *Imagined Families, Lived Families: Culture and Kinship in Contemporary Japan*, ed. University of Pittsburgh, Akiko Hashimoto, and John W. Traphagan (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 47.

³⁶ Christopher Perkins, "Satoshi Kon and Japan's Monsters in the City," *Nordlit* 42, no. Spring/Summer (November 11, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5009>, 142.

³⁷ Ibid., 144.

Expanding the parade of postwar monsters, Perkins uses Shōnen Batto, an urban legend figure who put people overwhelmed by the pressures of modern living into a coma, and Maromi, a product that provides relief through consumption, to argue that while monsters are helpful means to alleviate the pressures of modern living, they "can still wreak material havoc, and cause us to disengage with the actuality of everyday experience."³⁸ Perkins keenly observes that while Shōnen Batto is a dangerous figure in the story, three students hope he will come to attack the school so they don't have to take exams.³⁹ Perkins links the contradicting sentiment toward the monster to the anxiety of modern living, where disasters feel like an opportunity that can overturn the capitalist reality.⁴⁰ Gerald Figal makes similar arguments about the monsters in *Paranoia Agent*. While not explicitly drawing from monster theory, Figal finds the two monstrous figures as the symptom, the problem, and the solution of the otaku culture.⁴¹

Finally, *Paprika* is a product of the works that come before it. *Paprika*'s major conflict revolves around "DC Mini," a device that allows psychoanalysts to visit people's dreams. Dr. Atsuko Chiba tests DC Mini on voluntary patients outside the research facility under the guise of her alter-ego, "Paprika." DC Mini is misused, causing

³⁸ Ibid., 149.

³⁹ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 149.

⁴¹ Gerald Figal, "Monstrous Media and Delusional Consumption in Satoshi Kon's *Paranoia Agent*," *Mechademia* 5, no. 1 (2010): 139–55, 155.

reality and dreams to become indistinguishable. When the world is on the brink of destruction, Paprika becomes a giant woman to save the world.

Besides her giant status at the film's end, Paprika is a sublime figure. William O. Gardner enacts the Cyber Sublime and the Virtual Mirror as rhetorical devices to present Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Kon's *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika* as opposing viewpoints toward information technology. Gardner locates the essential scheme of the Cyber Sublime in *Ghost in the Shell's* representations of the data/cyberspace, whose fundamental characteristic is its irrepresentability.⁴²

Centering Kusanagi's transcendence into a pure digital being, Gardner shows the promises of the data/cyberspace as a site of transcendence or simply sublime.⁴³

Gardner presents Kon's engagement with the internet, another instance of a dataspace, as the opposite of the transcendental potential promised by Cyber Sublime.⁴⁴ Using the Virtual Mirror, Gardner concludes that Kon's vision of the virtual worlds looks like dreams or delusions, "far from sublime, and fundamentally human."⁴⁵ Though I agree with Gardner's assessment, *Paprika* invokes a different sublime through sublime objects.

⁴² William O Gardner, "The Cyber Sublime and the Virtual Mirror: Information and Media in the Works of Oshii Mamoru and Satoshi Kon," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 18, no. 1 (March 2009): 44–70, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjfs.18.1.44>, 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

Woman as a Symptom and Treatment

Paprika opens with detective Toshimi Konakawa's dream, which begins with him going undercover in a circuit. The covert mission goes south as Konakawa finds himself trapped inside the cage on the stage and exposed under a spotlight. Swarmed and entrapped by people wearing his face, Konakawa sinks beneath the ground and begins to freefall. A red-hair trapeze artist, dream therapist Paprika, catches Konakawa and shouts encouragement as they transition into a montage concatenated using motifs from well-known live-action film sequences. Kon's longtime collaborator Composer Hirasawa Susumu's high-energy electronic music injects the montage with urgency as the pair exits the initial danger. Konakawa switches roles with Paprika, becoming her savior as he holds her in his arms and swings away on a rope in a jungle. Konakawa heroically comments on his regret that the suspect got away. Paprika quickly confronts him and says, "Aren't you the one who escaped?" Before he can answer, a tree branch catches Konakawa's neck, forcing them to fall from the rope.

A match cut between the tree branch and a steel wire wrapped around Konakawa's neck introduces the next scene, where an unknown figure strangles him. Paprika, who wakes up next to him, finds a suitcase and attacks the assailant. A guitar then replaces the suitcase using another match cut, revealing the detective encouraging Paprika to hit the assailant again. This montage is strung together with match cuts of interchangeable props while retaining the same kinetic energy from one to another. Each cut in this sequence references classic movies, *Tarzan*, *From Russia with Love*,

and *Roman Holiday*. The music halts along with the montage's kinetic energy when a mysterious figure appears behind Paprika. Konakawa notices the figure and chases him into an entrance, leading to the crime scene he is investigating. While the detective is taking in the scene, the mysterious figure escapes through an exit at the end of the hallway. Failing to chase after the figure, Konakawa plummets again while the hallway twists around him. The sequence fades into white, leaving nothing but an echoing question: "What about the rest of it?!"

Konakawa's dream sequence repeats three times in the film, ending with the crime scene (figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2. Konakawa's dream sequence with seamless match-cut transitions until it is interrupted by the hallway scene.

The crime scene comes from anxiety generated by Konakawa's current criminal case.

The film reveals that the crime scene in his dream is a smokescreen that Konakawa's

unconscious psyche conjures to represent his failed dreams of becoming a filmmaker. As Konakawa slowly recovers from the intensity of the dream, Paprika rises next to him. The two talks through his dream while Paprika explains the dream machine, DC Mini, which is still in early development. As a dream psychoanalyst, Dr. Chiba uses her alter ego, Paprika, to encourage transference with the analysand.⁴⁶ For transference to occur, the analyst must embody the analysand's desire.

In the detective's dream, Paprika plays the supportive role and takes notes on Konakawa's dreams. Though playing along with his dream, Paprika questions Konakawa's avoidant tendency, represented through the sudden transitions between scenes. She also augments her performance once she realizes her role in each scene. Sometimes as the mischievous coconspirator, like Princess Anne in *Roman Holiday*, and sometimes as the damsel in distress, like Jane Porter in *Tarzan*. Her femininity gently guides the detective to come to terms with unrealized potential. As the signifier of the detective's desire, Paprika helps him articulate his frustration and anxiety without language.

In other words, Paprika exposes his symptoms so that she can find ways to treat him. Though her role changes from scene to scene, Paprika's femininity is a sublime object for the detective to articulate his experience. As discussed in Chapter 1, the sublime object replaces the initial lost object. According to Lacanian psychoanalytic theories,

⁴⁶ A person undergoing psychoanalysis.

since the lost object is irrecoverable, individuals raise other objects to the lost object's dignity to alleviate the loss's pain. Konakawa's anxiety dream begins with him giving up on filmmaking, and his difficulty at work triggers the same anxiety and causes him to hide away in different movie sequences unless he comes to terms with his unrealized potential.

Paprika acts as the sublime object in his dreams to rescue and be rescued by him so that he can move forward with his life. Their dynamic mirrors the hard-boiled detective and his female counterpart in film noir. Through Žižek's lens, Konakawa's ontological consistency relies on Paprika. When her behaviors betray his assumption, such as questioning his statement or saving him though she is the damsel in distress, the scene cuts to another. Paprika is a free-floating signifier and not an ontological entity.

I open my analysis of *Paprika* with this sequence because it highlights femininity's function in constructing a patriarchal subject. Paprika shapeshifts to embody the other for the self so that those around her can articulate their identity. The opening credits further buttress Paprika's identity as the sublime object. Bidding goodbye to Konakawa as she concludes their session, Paprika kisses a business card and hands it over to the detective. The lipstick-stained business card zooms into the title card.

The lipstick mark and Paprika are interchangeable as they both signify desire. Motion to motion and from reality to fantasy, the sequential montage follows Paprika jumping between commercial images by taking the place of the feminine figures

pictured within and interacting with other commercial objects. She rides a red rocket pictured on a delivery truck, and when she flies off the frame, she becomes the woman leaning on a man in a cigarette billboard. Paprika then walks to the neighboring advertisement to pick up the glass of beer. She then emerges behind a monitor, with a sleeping salaryman in front, and gently covers him with his coat. Paprika dons a white dress, like a woman on a poster hanging on the man's cubical wall. We can assume that the posters of women are celebrities this man follows, whose images serve as a rescue for the exhausted man. Paprika fades in and out of reality and stops at a burger place. The camera lingers on her red lips as she bites into the burger like a fast-food commercial.

When the sun is about to rise, several wipe transitions, illustrated as fast-moving neighboring vehicles, zoom onto Paprika's face to reveal Chiba's face. Chiba looks nothing like Paprika. Chiba has black hair and calm facial expressions, except she wears the same shade of red lipstick, suggesting Paprika is Chiba's cosmetics (figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3. Paprika jumps between images until she transforms into Dr. Chiba.

The juxtaposition between Paprika and the feminine figures in consumer products highlights how the signifier is more alluring than its use-value. Paprika stands in the place of the object of desire to draw forth a desire for something more, a promise for something that can be a cure-all. This juxtaposition also warns of the danger of desire since the same practice that could help people is also a consumer-capitalist apparatus corporations use to make false promises and further entrap consumers into a capitalist pattern. Žižek famously uses Coca-Cola to talk about how the appeal of a commercial product does not come from its use-value but from its embodiment of "IT." The "IT"

factor is a surplus of enjoyment, or as Lacan puts it, *objet petit a*. As the unattainable desire, *objet petit a* is the factor that makes an ordinary object sublime. Žižek notes that "a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of... the impossible-real object of desire."⁴⁷

Following Žižek's logic, the cigarette, the beer, and the feminine figures depicted in the opening credits are sublime objects that address a lack in a patriarchal subject who understands the self as a project that requires constant perfection. Consumption as a denial of lack, or simply commodity fetishism, is made dangerously effortless through late capitalism and neoliberalism.

Consumption as identity formation echoes Azuma's database consumption, also argued by Ogg, where one's identity is a collection of items or signifiers. *Paprika* demonstrates this form of identity through the first victim of DC Mini, Himuro. Himuro has no meaningful dialogue, but the film illustrates his personality with a few frames. Himuro's room is simplistic in design yet rich in information. Several establishing shots offer a glimpse into his identity: shelves filled with dolls in progress, magazines for gay men, and a picture of Himuro when he was a child in a feminine-style kimono. Chiba discovers a hole hidden inside Himuro's closet. As she climbs down, wishing to gain more information, she discovers a theme park at the end of the hallway. Behind a fence, Chiba sees the same doll, which represents Himuro's

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition (London New York: Verso, 2009), 221.

alter ego. When Chiba attempts climbing over the fence, she discovers this is a trap, also the possible cause of Himuro's accident. Himuro's downfall is caused by his retrieval into the closet, figuratively in dreams and metaphorically in terms of his sexuality. Later in the film, Paprika reaches the furthest depth of Himuro's dream and finds the husk that was once Himuro. After chasing one signifier after another, Himuro only manages to create an extravagant façade. Through Himuro's dreamscape, *Paprika* suggests that identity formation through consumption cannot address the lack.

Instead, the film presents another solution. Assuming position with the sublime object allows the psychoanalyst to understand the analysand. As a psychoanalyst, Chiba's alter ego, Paprika, takes the necessary steps to encourage transference. For transference to occur, the analyst must become the sublime object for the analysand. The film demonstrates Paprika's role as the sublime object by implementing the male gaze. For instance, when Paprika rushes to rescue Dr. Toratarō Shima in the collective dreamworld caused by Inui's misuse of DC Mini, she first plays along with his delusion by assuming the role of a country girl he once saved. In the dream, Shima believes he is a king until Paprika's psychosexual intervention awakens him. Paprika reminds Shima of who she is by laying on top of him, and the frame intimately shows her smiling and sinking deep into Shima's body. With Paprika inside, Shima expands until he overshadows the surrounding forest. Shima first protests in panic, but as his body pops like a balloon, he smiles in ecstasy and regains consciousness. This sequence signals Paprika's function as the sublime object and gestures towards a

fearsome pleasure often associated with the sublime. *Paprika* is a detective story revolving around the misuse of the dream machine, which causes people's dreams to collide and collapse into each other, forming a giant fold that invades reality. That said, the story is also about different people coming to terms with their lack with the help of Paprika.

Paprika helps Konakawa and Shima, yet some fail to do the same. Dr. Kōsaku Tokita is the inventor of DC Mini. Tokita sees himself as a crude robot toy, explicitly represented in dreams. The first time the film introduces Tokita as a toy robot in Himuro's apartment. Among Himuro's belongings is a toy robot. The robot's chest is bust open, and its right arm holds a sign with "help me" written with neon lights. The picture of Tokita's face, ripped from a picture, is nailed to the head of the robot. Later in the collective dreamworld, Tokita's alter ego mirrors Himuro's image of him. Tokita's inferiority complex comes from his frustration over a lack of understanding of the world and the people around him. Therefore, Tokita copes with his inferiority by repeatedly filling himself with whatever he thinks can "fix" him (consuming sublime objects). Tokita's desire to understand the world around him and his coping mechanism conjures his alter ego, a giant toy robot who eats everything. Tokita's alter ego mumbles in the collective dream as he runs around the city. When he sees Chiba, who attempts to save him, he picks her up and swallows her because consuming is the only way to make sense of the world around him.

To briefly summarize, the sublime object speaks to a certain lack. *Objet petit a* is the *je ne sais quoi*, or the "IT" factor, that makes ordinary objects sublime. Sublime objects cannot replace or fully address the lost object but can temporarily relieve the desire for the lost object. Psychoanalysis, like Chiba, can assume the position with the sublime object to help the analysand come to terms with the lost object by exposing their "symptoms." These contexts are necessary to understand the giant woman at the denouement, also mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. The film offers its thesis statement through the parade sequence, in which everyone's desire melds into a collective dream and, thanks to DC Mini, the collective invades reality. Unlike the collective conscious, theorized by Carl Jung to explain why similar myths appear across human civilization, the dream parade comprises everyday consumer products and manic proclamations for sublime objects.

"Now it's a Showtime!" a grinning businessman loudly declares as he tilts off the roof, and a line of similarly dressed salarymen follows suit like synchronized swimmers. Umbrellas, fire hydrants, and empty refrigerators march to the street in a haze of confetti that appears out of thin air. The vibrant iridescence of the parade colors the mundane-looking pedestrians with wonder and confusion. A replica of the Statue of Liberty, an animated knight's armor, gaudy smiling Daruma dolls with both eyes filled⁴⁸, and a golden Buddha statue flock to celebrate freedom. A weather

⁴⁸ Daruma doll has a design that is rich in symbolism. According to Japanese traditions, one would fill one of the eyes with black ink when she or he makes a wish, and then fill in the other eye when the wish is fulfilled. Daruma is regarded more as a talisman of good luck in

forecaster appears and twirls on the screen while repeating the word "sunny" like a mantra. Middle-aged salarymen join the parading frogs as they turn into walking musical instruments. Homemakers and their kids transform into golden statues and maneki-neko⁴⁹ as they merge into the crowd. A group of high school girls with cellphones as heads walk down the street, then lift their skirts and chant, "It's most valuable while it's still a bud." Men in suits with camera phones in the place of heads crawl under the lifted skirts while eagerly agreeing to the girl's statement, "Yes, yes, we shall preserve the memory forever!" A group of homeless people declares, "No flower means no fruits," joins a group of *Hikikomori*⁵⁰ in the shape of computer monitors who cry, "I shall do nothing because everything is empty." A campaigning politician turns into a Daruma with three out of four eyes filled, pleading to the crowd, "Please fill my eye with your votes in the name of your frustration."

Tiny, balding older men are climbing onto the tiny throne, claiming to be the true king, yet one immediately replaces another. Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu deities chant, "god and Buddha shall all change doctrines and enjoy the chaotic indulgence to exorcise angst." "Am I dreaming?" asks Konakawa. "Yes, everyone on this planet is," answers the bartenders of the dream therapy bar. The parade sequence is made even

Japan, and it has been commercialized by many Buddhist temples to use alongside goal setting.

⁴⁹ Maneki-neko looks like a cat sitting down, with one arm raised up. The maneki-neko is a common Japanese figurine, often believed to bring good and fortune luck to the owner.

⁵⁰ Hikikomori literally "pulling inward, being confined") is a Japanese term to refer to the phenomenon of reclusive adolescents or adults who withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement.

more manic by the distinctively manic score composed by Susumu Hirasawa. The misuse of DC Mini allows people to be honest with their desires as they often do in dreams. The too-eager-to-please salarymen hide their despair behind a smile. The animated commodities are the identity of those who consume them. Young people seek validation by becoming human spectacles without processing the gaze on their bodies. Religious teachings foster the longing for a glorified past that never existed by suppressing desires.

The parade highlights the symptoms of modern living as the chain of signifiers marches forward aimlessly (figure 5.4).



Figure 5.4. The manic dream parade, a line of objects forming a chain of desire.

Paprika, like the rest of Kon's works, is a product of the lost era. The parade sequence speaks to precarity and database consumption as a coping mechanism.

Reading the sequence against the backdrop of post-postwar Japan, I will return to the sequence that opens this chapter. The manic parade turns into a fold that links dreams with reality. The fold indiscriminately consumes everything in it. The perpetrator behind the stolen DC Mini, Inui, empowers himself through the fold to become seemingly indestructible. Inui's goal is to free the world from imperfections and impurities. He treats himself as the first project by fixing his legs. Inui's scale and casual destruction of Tokyo's city skyline summons images of the sublime giants in Japanese popular media, such as Godzilla.

Unlike Godzilla, a sublime figure who embraces complicated feelings toward WWII, Inui highlights the patriarchal undertone of the sublime as he stands as the only entity that transcends into divinity. In Barbara Freeman's words, Inui is "an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal subject."⁵¹ Inui sees everything in binary terms, broken versus healthy, power versus weakness, perfection versus impurity, and just like how the sublime is built on assumed sexual differences, Inui's binary logic is deeply flawed and easily overturned. Paprika sees Inui as just another patient of hers and forces him to come to terms with his flawed justification for his desire by becoming his sublime object.

Paprika transforms into the binary opposition of Inui, a young feminine figure, and eventually consumes him. As the feminine figure eats away the fold between dream

⁵¹ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 4.

and reality, she returns the world to normal by establishing the uncrossable line between dream and reality, signifier and signified.

Conclusion

Satoshi Kon passed away in 2010, which makes *Paprika* his final feature-length film. Kon shared that *Paprika* was a film that he wanted to make initially, and it is evident that his previous work has been peppered with *Paprika*'s whimsiness and a postmodernist approach to time and space. Though thematically different from Kon's other work, *Paprika* is a thesis statement on Kon's previous preoccupations. The unbearable expectations of being a neoliberal subject that requires constant maintenance demonstrated in *Perfect Blue*, *Tokyo Godfathers*, and *Paranoia Agent*, become the manic parade leading to nowhere but destruction. *Paprika* is deeply concerned with the anxiety of modern living as constant precarity looms over the seemingly banal world. Though the story is not apocalyptic, the sudden escalation to a world-ending threat resonates with my observation of the lost era media's affinity for perpetually apocalyptic settings.

Paprika follows Kon's traditions of woman protagonists. Like Chiyoko and Mima, Chiba struggles with her alter ego, but her relationship with Paprika exists somewhere between Mima's eventual assimilation and Chiyoko's healthy separation. Paprika is the opposite of Chiba. Chiba is grounded, levelheaded, and exercises control over her desires, whereas Paprika is flirtatious, eccentric, and spontaneous. As a psychoanalyst, Chiba draws a definitive line between dream and reality as she

recognizes the significance of transference as a psychoanalytic tool. Chiba consciously separates herself from Paprika because Chiba does not want what Paprika appears to desire, as her analysts determine them. Chiba creates a split between herself and Paprika, explained in the film, that she no longer dreams. During the dream parade, Paprika rejects Chiba's commands and behaves independently. Instead of saving the world, Chiba decides to be honest with her desire and confesses her love for Tokita. Chiba finally dreams, and, in the dream, she tells Tokita how much she loves him for tenderness and thoughtfulness, to which Paprika smiles proudly.

Interestingly, following Žižek's train of logic, Chiba's revelation attests to Lacan's woman as a symptom of man. Men's ontological consistency relies on the feminine, whereas, as Žižek argues, a woman does not exist; "she insists."⁵² Chiba's ontological consistency depends on her reconciliation with Paprika that she should not discipline the part of her she cannot control. That said, Chiba is the only female character in the film with personal struggles, so it is unclear if this observation supports Žižek's assertion.

Paprika is not an ontological entity, as demonstrated by the giant woman looking nothing like Paprika but closer to Chiba. Paprika's femininity is curated and constructed for men to articulate their identity. While Chiba arguably has been on a hero's journey, she is preoccupied by the malaise of men around her.

⁵² Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 177.

In other words, Paprika is a sublime object. Kon employs femininity to explore his identity and the world around him. In turn, women in Kon's work become a cipher for the complex layers tucked under the seemingly banal society.

CHAPTER 6: Feminine Sublime

I stated in the introduction that the dissertation intends not to centralize the sublime as the umbrella theoretical framework. The gendered nature of the sublime and the necessary steps one must take to overcome the sublime allow me to use the body of the giant woman as a site of discourse to discuss the works in my analysis thus far. Despite medium differences, the media objects in my analyses thus far are directed and written by men and mostly feature a male protagonist. Even in the case of Satoshi Kon, whose works feature women leads, focus more on the ontological experience of the men. I do not wish to suggest that men cannot write about non-patriarchal experiences by pointing out the gender of the authors. Instead, I want to explore other sensibilities of encountering what is beyond language and comprehension.

In this chapter, I invoke the feminine sublime and abjection, a visceral reaction toward the sublime, to explore identity formation that does not rely on the Romantic or postmodern configurations of the tension between the self and other.

Barbara Freeman conceptualizes the feminine sublime to counter the transcendental property of the sublime. Freeman argues that an encounter of the sublime conceives “excess only as a frightening (and feminine) other provides the occasion for a confrontation that enables the (masculine) self to confirm, or enhance, its own existence.”¹ Freeman underlines the unchallenged gender-neutral façade of discourse

¹ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 25.

on the sublime to uncover the sublime's patriarchal undercurrent. Freeman uses "feminine" instead of "female" or "womanly" to reject assertions of innate sexual difference and to radically rearticulate the role of gender in the formulation of "an alternative position with respect to excess and the possibilities of its figuration."² Examining classic poetry, such as that of Sappho, and contemporary novels, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Freeman provides a feminist recontextualization of encountering the unrepresentable. Rather than using the sublime encounter as an opportunity to enhance one's existence, *Beloved* manifests the trauma of slavery as a haunting figure who refuses to be exorcized, assimilated, or forgotten. The feminine sublime does not confirm a singular interpretation of historical trauma but sustains "a condition of radical uncertainty as the very condition of its possibility."³ Using *Beloved* as an example, Freeman argues that the feminine sublime does not seek to represent the horror of American slavery entirely but, through the haunting ghostly figure, testifies to "both the traumatic institution of slavery and the immensity of that which cannot be said."⁴

Similarly, Julia Kristeva's "abject" wrestles with trauma but more personal than collective. Contrasting Lacan's sublime object, which allows the subject to form meanings through coordinating with one's *objet petit a*, Kristeva's abject points to a

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

place where meaning collapses.⁵ The primary example of the abject is the visceral reaction to sights of corpses and human wastes, forms of excess, which prompts the desire to look away or vomit. Kristeva posits that the desire to disengage or purge the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”⁶ To Kristeva, the wishful transcendental experience of the sublime is a coping mechanism for the breakdowns associated with the overwhelming sensation caused by the irrepresentable - death. Body fluids, human excrement, and corpses remind us of the unavoidable eventuality of death. Kristeva highlights the corpse as the utmost expression of abject because it is “death infecting life.”⁷ Though we do not desire death, Kristeva posits that we are drawn to the abject. We enjoy the abject “violently and painfully” because it forces us to confront our materiality and eventually reconcile with the fear of death.⁸ Kristeva posits that great Western modern literature, such as those by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka, explores the abject through depictions of collapsing boundaries and linguistic binaries of the self/other and observes that “all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse.”⁹

Trauma and the blurry line between self and other unite the feminine sublime and the abject. Through a close examination of Lee Miller’s war photography that heavily

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

features ruins and corpses in the wake of the Holocaust, Jui-Ch'i Liu invokes the feminine sublime to argue that Miller's works "interpellated the spectator to intimately share a co-emerging relationship with the war trauma."¹⁰ While Liu does not explicitly address the abject, Miller's framings of ruins and corpses irradiate abject horror. Liu skillfully notes that the feminine sublime does not encourage the beholder to rescue or disengage from the other but to sit with the discomfort that the other elicits.¹¹ In Freeman's terms, the discomfort of the other is the "radical uncertainty."¹²

It seems that rather than a confrontation between the self and the other, another mode of identity formation is enabled by embracing the uncertainty the blurry line grants. I want to explore this idea further by close reading a recontextualization of a femme fatale in Japanese popular media – Fujiko Mine from the *Lupin III* franchise.

The Woman Called Fujiko Mine

Illustrated and written by Monkey Punch, *Lupin the Third* (Lupin III) started as a manga series in the late 1960s. The series grew immensely and spawned a multimedial franchise that included animated television series, films, musicals, board games, and video games. Like many other evergreen franchises, *Lupin III's*

¹⁰ Jui-Ch'i Liu, "Beholding the Feminine Sublime: Lee Miller's War Photography," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 2 (January 2015): 308–19, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678242>, 318.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹² Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*, 12.

success is in debt to its memorable cast, which includes Arsene Lupin III, the grandson of Maurice Leblanc's fictional gentleman thief Arsene Lupin, Daisuke Jigen the sharpshooter, Goemon Ishikawa XIII, the wandering samurai, Koichi Zenigata the hard-boiled inspector, and Fujiko Mine the femme fatale. The main cast draws from literary and cinematic tropes to tell episodic stories about heists, espionage, and mysteries. The series allows the cast members to be more than parodies through distinct characterizations.

While the male cast members have consistent and recognizable character traits, Fujiko's early depictions vary drastically from story to story. Initially conceived as a "Bond girl" like presence, Fujiko was once a codename for the different women who would befriend and eventually double cross Lupin to steal away the treasure of the week. As a deceptive sex symbol, her name is commonly believed to be a pun on the size of her breasts because it can be translated as the peak of Mt. Fuji with the feminine suffix "ko" attached to the end. Fujiko's sexuality is her weapon of choice. Like the femme fatale trope from which she originated, she embodies a specific otherness to the assumed male audience, that the sexually liberated woman is seen as dangerous and duplicitous. Given her popularity, Monkey Punch consolidated the many Fujiko into one character with various disguises.

Despite her inconsistent characterizations, Fujiko has been continuously regarded as one of the most influential female characters in the history of manga and anime. Notably, Fuji TV polled over 12,000 Japanese people of all ages about their favorite

characters in 2017. Fujiko held the top spot as the “Most Splendid Heroines” amongst the Shōwa (1926 – 1989) audience and remained at number three amongst the Heisei (1989 – 2019) audience.¹³ As a side character, Fujiko outranks cultural icons like Sailor Moon and adored characters in popular Shōnen series like Mikasa from *Attack on Titan* or Nami from *One Piece*. Though the program did not offer data on gender, Fujiko, as a sex symbol who operates within the moral greys, clearly resonated with people. That said, Fujiko’s sexuality has been negotiated throughout the different iterations. Though Monkey Punch is the creator of the series, many influential artists have left their marks on the franchise. Notably, before they founded the world-renowned Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata worked on the first television adaptation of the series. Miyazaki reflected on Lupin as an “apathetic” cultural icon of the 1970s when the loud protests to war and the automatic extension of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty quieted in the 1960s.¹⁴ Miyazaki reimagined Lupin as the antithesis of apathy, a driven man, a son of a poor man, defined by his endless chase for something better on the horizon.¹⁵ They also reshaped the other cast members to make them less apathetic and more compelling as characters, including shying away from Fujiko’ “cheap eroticism.”¹⁶ The original television series was a

¹³ Nakamura, Toshi. “12,000 Japanese Fans Vote on Japan’s Top Heroes and Heroines,” ANIME NOW!, September 9, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170909234452/http://www.anime-now.com/entry/2017/09/09/230012>.

¹⁴ Hayao Miyazaki, *Starting Point: 1979-1996* (San Francisco, Calif: VIZ Media, 2009), 279.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

great success and ran for three seasons, with the third installment, Part III: The Pink Jacket Adventures, ending in 1985. The fourth installment would come twenty-seven years later and, once again, negotiate Fujiko's sexuality.

Director Yamamoto Sayo, a woman who used to sit in front of the TV watching *Lupin III*, was tasked to resurrect the TV series. After the success of her directorial debut, *Michiko & Hatchin* (2008), the studio approached Yamamoto with the director role. The studio gave her total creative freedom to the extent that she could “ignore all previous serializations and characterizations as long as you can make *Lupin III* feel new.”¹⁷ Motivated to inject new ideas into the series without drastically changing any character's continuity, Yamamoto steals the leading role from the titular Lupin and gives it to Fujiko. Breaking the naming tradition of “*Lupin III: Part x*,” *The Woman Called Fujiko Mine (The Woman)* aired between April 4 and June 27, 2012.

Yamamoto recruited prolific screenwriter Okada Mari as the lead writer, making the series the only women-led franchise production. As the title suggests, the series' central mystery is Fujiko's backstory, with each episode attempting to answer who is the woman called Fujiko Mine. As a fresh start to the franchise, the story details how the original cast forms an ensemble with Fujiko as the thread that ties them together.

¹⁷ Yamamoto Sayo, An Interview with Director Sayo Yamamoto on the New “Lupin the Third,” interview by Taisuke Shimanuki, February 6, 2013, <https://www.cinra.net/article/interview-2013-02-06-000000-php>.

Under Yamamoto's direction, *The Woman* blends film noir aesthetics with the original manga's idiosyncrasies. For instance, the series uses stylized hatching and cross-hatching instead of traditional Cel shading to imply shadows. The muted color palette also gives the show a noir-esque quality that elicits a sense of nostalgia. In addition, Yamamoto asked composer Kikuchi Naruyoshi to create music reminiscent of the 1960s and the 70s. With a nostalgic visual and sonic palette, Yamamoto explores the unanswered question of "Who is Fujiko Mine?" The showrunners never directly answer this question but meditate on Fujiko's body as a bearer of gaze and vehicle of meaning.

While the series does not feature a perpetually apocalyptic setting, it is a product of the lost era that meditates on Japan's manga/anime industry. Besides being the only installment led by women showrunners, I believe the series proposes the feminist recontextualization of Fujiko as a sublime object for the patriarchal subject and wrestles with the abject horror of being the bear of gaze.

To Gaze Upon a Sublime Object

Titled *New Wuthering Heights*, *The Woman's* opening credits feature a poem recited by Pianist Hashimoto Ichiko against the hauntingly beautiful string instrumental score. The poem opens with a command, "Stop everything, leave everything behind except your beating heart and gaze upon me," while Fujiko raises her head and stares into the nonexistent camera. Apparatuses of gaze permeate every frame of the credits as Fujiko's naked body is posed as the focus of televisions, owls, and cameras.

Against the sexually charged images, the almost monotonous narration interrogates the desires of the audience (figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1. The opening sequence contrasts looking with being looked at. It mixes traditional manga style with noir sensibilities.

Citing Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the poem considers the joy of stealing, accompanied by images of Fujiko's provocative, joyful facial expressions. Like its gothic counterpart, the poem takes a darker turn to consider what would drive someone to steal.

To steal is not to take or break something but something unique. An elegant vice. It's an amalgam of secrets, felonies, mischief, and terror. Just like with Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, A life dedicated to stealing brings about the ultimate sensuality. It's a sexy prison from which one cannot escape. The psychological foundation remains unknown. Who is the slave? Who is the master? Is God watching her? Has God abandoned her? The act of stealing lets her forget everything but brings out faint memories.

Without answering, the poem chases Fujiko as she runs from one scene to another.

Don't speak, run. Don't run, hide. If you find me, punish me. If you punish me, kill me. Save me.

Fujiko spirals as she contemplates the morality of stealing but stops herself with a sense of defiance by gazing into the camera again. As if Fujiko becomes the narrator who says:

But you have nothing left for me to steal, silly boy. You are empty, just like me. If you wish to find me, leave everything behind except your beating heart and gaze upon me.

The opening theme sets the tone for the entire series by presenting Fujiko as an object of desire, a mystery waiting to be solved, and a blank canvas. Like the femme fatale trope from which she originated, Fujiko embodies qualities of the other for the assumed male audience. Fujiko represents the enticing danger of the sexually liberated woman. Early depictions of the femme fatale reflected the increasing anxiety about masculine identity in the face of feminist agitation. The hard-boiled fiction essentializes the dangerous woman in the figure of the femme fatale and “render[s] her erotically lethal.”¹⁸ On the other hand, Žižek posits that the femme

¹⁸ Robert Stanley Redmond, “The Femme Fatale in ‘Postfeminist’ Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction: Redundant or Re-Inventing Herself?” (Massey University, 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/10179/5645>, 20.

fatale confirms the ontological consistency of the masculine subject but not vice versa. The poem, however, can be read as an antithesis to Žižek's observation as the femme fatale's ontological consistency crumbles as she contemplates her role as the sublime object. Fujiko's body became a site of feminist discourse around the desire to look and the abject horror of being looked at.

All thirteen episodes contemplate this duality by contextualizing the different gazes cast upon Fujiko. The series skillfully completes three tasks. First, it challenges the patriarchal configuration of Fujiko by considering her point of view. Second, it unveils the complicated pleasures associated with Fujiko as a symbol of liberty. Finally, it steals Fujiko from her original context to contemplate the role of gender in identity formation.

The series accomplishes the first task through Fujiko's interactions with her cast mates. The first three episodes introduce the cast from Fujiko's perspective. Fujiko uses different disguises to infiltrate and steal the MacGuffin of the week. While each episode follows the episodic formula, a conversation between Fujiko and a man interrupts the flow of the narrative. In the first episode, the famous thief Lupin III meets Fujiko and finds the new rival fascinating. Because the two are going after the same item, they argue about who is more deserving. The flirtatious banter abruptly shifts to Fujiko calculatingly undermining Lupin when he suggests that Fujiko's only trick is her sexuality. Though neither of them obtains the item due to mutual sabotage, they form a playful relationship through their competition.

The episode ends with Fujiko finding Lupin's writings on her inner thigh, declaring that she is a prize to be stolen as she drives away on a bike. Behind her, Lupin cheerily declares Fujiko as the cure to his boredom. The dynamic between the two establishes Fujiko as the sublime object for Lupin, promising something greater than any MacGuffin for Lupin and the assumed male audience. That said, the frame lingers on Fujiko's ambivalent facial expressions upon discovering the statement. Fujiko glances up to focus on the road ahead and silently protests Lupin's definition of a woman.

Fujiko becomes the foil to a love interest of Daisuke, another member of the main cast, in the second episode. Playing a minor role in the story, Fujiko silently observes the melodrama unfolding between Daisuke and the tragic woman haunted by her past. The story ends in typical noir fashion, where the woman meets her tragic end, followed by Daisuke standing over her grave. Instead of cutting to black, Fujiko finds Daisuke and comments on her similarity with the woman. "Her past killed her," Fujiko says, "but unlike her, I will always outrun my past," to which Daisuke disagrees.

In the third episode, Fujiko disguises herself as a tutor for a wealthy family traveling on a train, where she meets another principal cast member, Goemon, the samurai. Fujiko effortlessly shifts her performance from the caring tutor to the damsel in distress to ensure her upper hand. While disguised, Fujiko tells Goemon that she is a woman without roots. Mixing an ounce of truth in her performance, Fujiko laments

her lack of purpose compared to the men around her. Later in the episode, Goemon finds the thief and exposes her using his impressive swordsman skills to reveal a naked Fujiko. Instead of feeling betrayed, Goemon still sees Fujiko as a kindhearted tutor. Perhaps because he recognizes the one piece of Fujiko's authenticity mixed within her lies, Goemon cannot bring himself to arrest her and decides to let her go. Surprised by Goemon's decision, Fujiko thanks him but states that everything she has done so far is pretending, rejecting even the authentic part of herself. Fujiko's interactions with the trio highlight several issues of her representations throughout the franchise (figure 6.2).

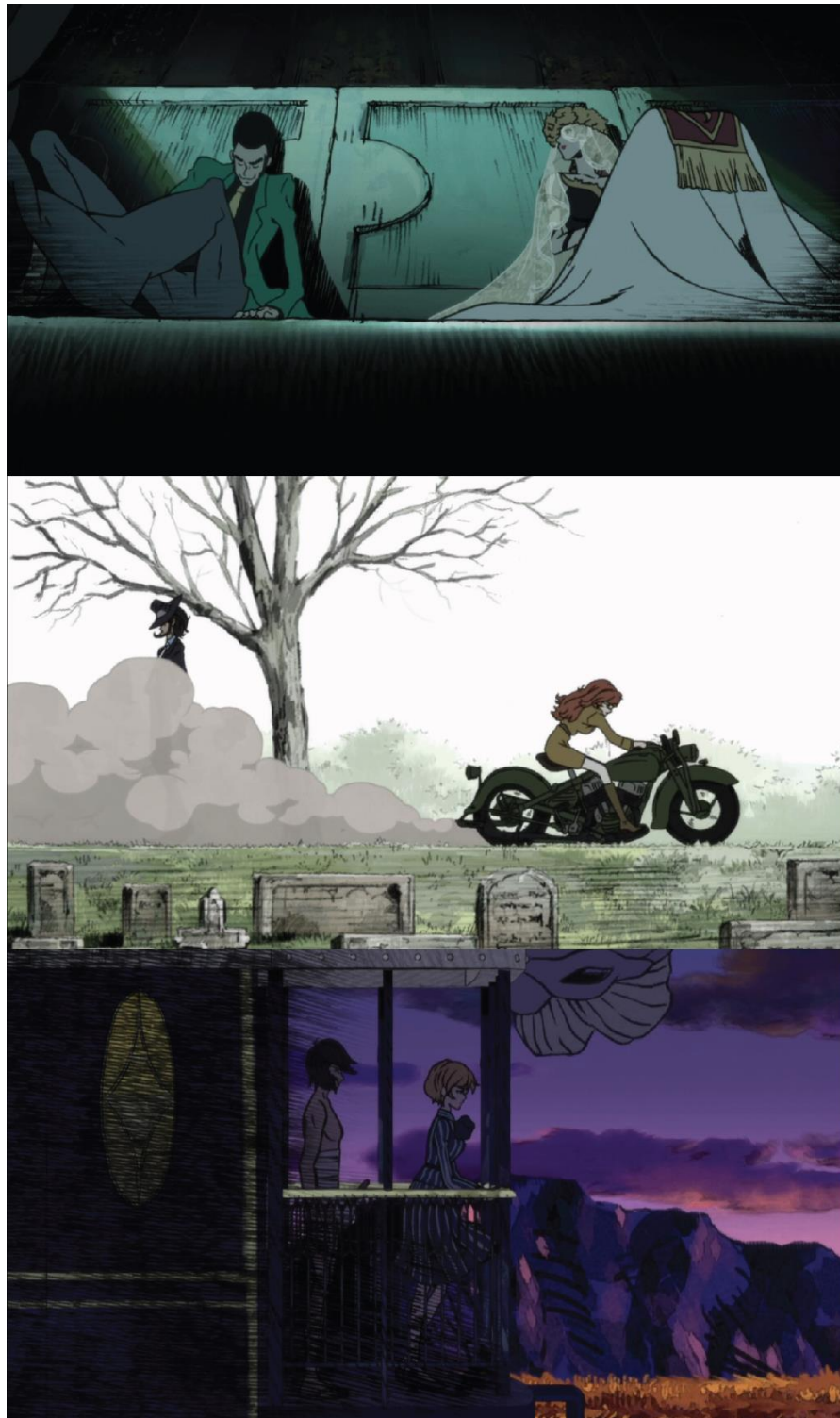


Figure 6.2. Fujiko's inconsistent characterization is explained as her in different disguises. Her interactions with her male castmates highlight her ambivalence toward her role as a foil. Top to bottom: Fujiko with Lupin, Daisuke, and Goemon.

As I stated earlier, every woman who meets and predictably double-crosses Lupin is named Fujiko, but they are treated as different characters from one story to another. These women lack ontological consistency except for their routine sabotage of the trio. As the femme fatale, Fujiko is Lupin's symptom. Fujiko's indiscriminate undermining of Lupin's heists allows him to remain in the endless chase that defines his perseverance and ambition. The show highlights Fujiko's function as one of the McGaffin through Lupin's declaration of ownership over her.

Similarly, Fujiko's interactions with Daisuke and Goemon in the show reference the multiple womanhood she inhabited over the years. Like an evil Barbie, the woman called Fujiko Mine has many dangerous and highly skilled occupations while maintaining a diverse wardrobe. As the object desire and distrust of the trio, Fujiko changes based on the need for their character development. Though *Monkey Punch* consolidates all versions of Fujiko into one character, it does not address the issues of her characterization. The show brings these issues to the surface through Fujiko's rejection of each definition of womanhood offered by others while set on a journey to steal back herself.

As the story progresses, Fujiko's continued interactions with the trio and other cast members shift away from seeking a definitive answer to womanhood but imply a past trauma as a cause of her unusual womanhood. In episode 5, Fujiko collaborates and then predictably double-crosses Lupin and Daisuke to steal the legendary red peacock statue tucked away in a pyramid. Before she can get away with the statue, the team

realizes the peacock is the key that can open the exit. More importantly, the statue is made from alexandrite, meaning removing it from the pyramid will make it lose its signature shade. Lupin persuades Fujiko that the legendary red peacock can only exist inside a tomb, so it is her choice of what is more important. Choosing her freedom, Fujiko leaves the peacock behind and runs into the next target. Furthermore, mechanic owls that surveil Fujiko can be spotted throughout the episodic adventures of the crew and suggest that Fujiko is running away from something. These hints of imprisonment seem to provide an ontological foundation that can explain why Fujiko wishes to choose a life of crime and freedom.

To Steal a Femme Fatale

Despite these hints, it is not Fujiko who is running away from her past. Though it is heavily suggested a man is behind the surveilling mechanical owls seeking to recapture Fujiko, the story reveals that the gaze belongs to two women – a mother and a daughter. Episode 9 shows a young girl becoming a test subject of a human experiment conducted by a man aiming to create the perfect woman. In addition to being subjected to numerous tests carried out by people in owl masks, the girl is trapped inside the facility as her feet are branded. Though we are set to believe this is Fujiko, the man has died, and the girl named Aisha has become bedridden due to all the experiments. Fujiko changes Aisha's life when she breaks into the facility to steal but is quickly captured by a scientist with an owl mask. Enticed by Fujiko's life of adventure, Aisha asks the scientist to use the memory-altering machine, once used on her, to graft her memory onto Fujiko. Unbeknownst to Aisha, the scientist in the owl

mask is her mother, recruited into the experiment, who feels remorse and wishes to give her daughter the life she never had. Disguising herself with a mask and voice changer, Aisha's mother lures Fujiko into the facility with a rumor of hidden treasure so that she can steal Fujiko's freedom for her daughter. Aisha, with her mother's help, releases Fujiko and lives vicariously through her as she steals, have sex for pleasure, and thrives in the morally grey space. Like the men Fujiko encounters, Aisha and her mother see Fujiko as a sublime object who embodies the lack. The mother-daughter relationship reads like a conversation between one person's older and younger selves. The younger self is forced to uphold arbitrary standards of femininity, and the older self feels regretful about the paths untaken and lives unlived. To cope with their losses, they latch onto a symbol of liberty. Aisha and her mother, as ontological entities, fetish Fujiko as a denial of lack of liberty.

Through Aisha and her mother, the show completes the second task of reclaiming Fujiko as a feminist icon. The series, however, does not settle on this reading as the definitive function of Fujiko. It sits with the radical uncertainty of identifying with a patriarchal fantasy. Fujiko, as a perfectly imperfect feminine archetype, begins to unravel when she/Aisha meets other women throughout the series. In more positive cases, Fujiko meets women who reject the value granted by others, like the opera singer who fakes her death to be with her lover. In other cases, the series explores the abject horror of being an object of desire to the point that one wishes to purge the other existing within the self. Episode 9 marks a sharp turn when Fujiko, under Aisha's influence, discovers an auction featuring a mute woman tattooed from head to

toe by a man who uses her body as a canvas. The woman bears a striking resemblance to Fujiko but behaves like a child who cannot even speak (figure 6.3).

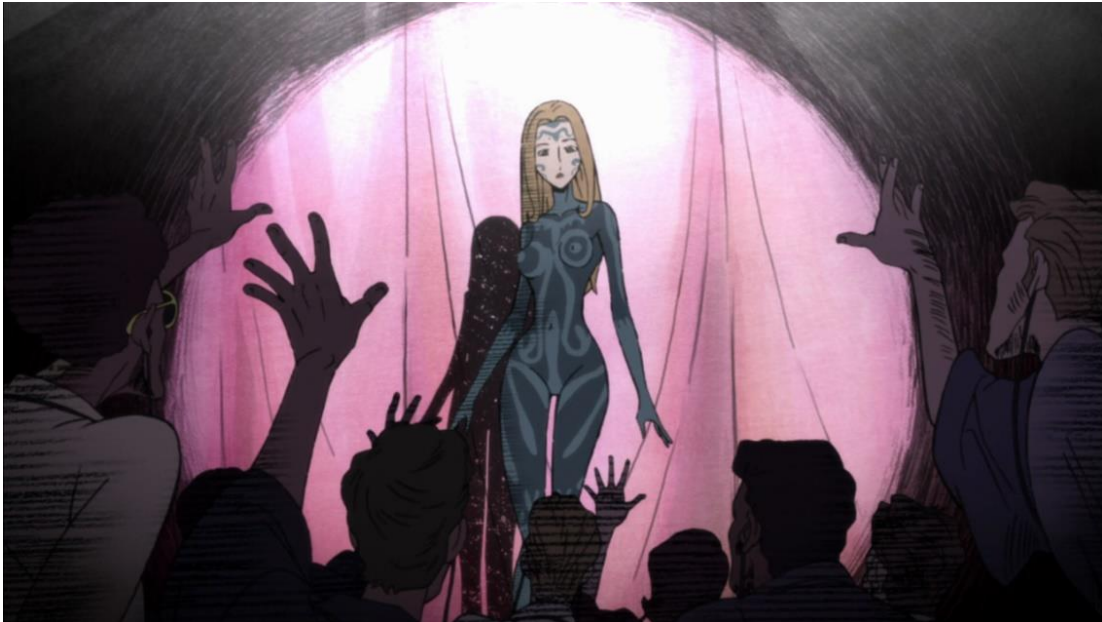


Figure 6.3. A woman being auctioned as an artwork. Besides her tattoo, she looks like Fujiko.

Fujiko attempts to steal her but uncharacteristically declares to the crew that she intends to kill her, thus ending her misery. The tension culminates in a standoff between Fujiko and Lupin. As if Lupin can see Aisha behind Fujiko's eyes, he persuades her not to harm the woman or herself, and she does not need to be defined by her past. Lupin's words paralyze Fujiko and Aisha as they encounter the abject in a place where the line between self and other blurs and all meanings collapse. Failing content with the abject, Fujiko/Aisha attempts to die by suicide without knowing that Lupin has switched her gun with a water gun. This exchange grapples with the paradox of the femme fatale as a mode of existence and symbol of liberty. Fujiko's

sexuality as an empowerment does not escape patriarchal configurations of power and control.

In an earlier episode, Lupin is trapped in a dream with Aisha, who demands Lupin chase after her. Lupin fails to do so, and Aisha hints that he can only find his way back to reality through something real while pointing at his bleeding hand. Aisha's rationale is that what is real is what is painful or abject. The correlation between pain and reality also serves as a metacommentary of the showrunners' task of making Fujiko feel more relatable. To give Fujiko a backstory, to turn her into an ontological entity, and to make her real is to give her pain. The problem is that Fujiko experiences only freedom and no pain, making this task impossible. When Fujiko regains control of her mind, she confronts Aisha by saying, "Aisha, I didn't do what I do because of you. I am fundamentally a sex-loving Kleptomaniac, and no matter how you change my past, I am who I am." To conclude the series' question of womanhood, Fujiko proudly answers, "I am a woman named Fujiko Mine." Instead of trying to rewrite Fujiko to make her more relatable to the new generation of women, the showrunners recontextualize the pleasure of looking at Fujiko and resist her patriarchal figurations.

The abject and feminine sublime comes to the fore in Fujiko's final act of stealing. With Lupin's help, Fujiko steals Aisha away from the facility. Aisha's mother understands and thanks Fujiko and Lupin for giving her a final chance to live. The final sequence shows Fujiko asking Aisha to use her eyes to witness the outside world and commands Aisha to gaze upon her while dancing in the water. Fujiko's beauty

glistens with the water beneath her. Aisha looks at Fujiko happily and peacefully passes away like she is dreaming. Fujiko gently brushes the hair away from Aisha's face and whispers, "I will give you my treasure, something you've always dreamt of - freedom." This ending does not give Fujiko a traumatic past to affirm Aisha's or the audience's identity. Through Aisha, it provides a mode of witnessing the traumatic institution of patriarchy. The composition of Aisha gazing upon Fujiko mirrors someone watching Fujiko on a screen (figure 6.4).



Figure 6.4. Aisha gazes upon Fujiko and closes her eyes.

The sequence summarizes the showrunners' complicated pleasure of looking at Fujiko. The question of who Fujiko Mine is not a question but a meditation on femininity. The final sequence parallels the first episode, where Lupin declares Fujiko his ultimate treasure. Fujiko sabotages Lupin's bike and drives away, allowing him to chase her endlessly. As for the stolen Fujiko, they return her just as they found her.

CONCLUSION

The giant woman at the of the world remains a mysterious and mythical figure in the stories, and her transient temporality further adds to her ethereal quality. Like a magic ritual, this dissertation conjures her as a cipher for Japan's post-postwar modernity, channels her to elucidate the gendered nature of political and cultural discourse that initially appears to be universal, and eventually dispels her by rejecting patriarchal understandings of civilization, modernity, precarity, and apocalypse.

Each chapter performs different aspects of the ritual. Chapter 1 gathers the materials required for her conjuration, which include a gendered approach to the sublime, an overview of the sublime entities in popular Japanese texts reflecting upon nuclearity, and an examination of the pivotal period that is Japan in the 1990s.

The second chapter summons her through a close reading of *Neon Genesis Evangelion (EVA)*. As one of the earliest examples, or even the first, of using the giant woman as an allegory of calamity, *EVA* invokes psychoanalytic theories to contemplate the sense of precarity permeating post-postwar Japan.

Chapter 3 challenges her uniqueness by discussing the role of femininity in defining different iterations of masculine ideals, demonstrated in the 1997 video game *Final Fantasy VII*. Through closely reading different representations of otherness, postcolonial and feminine, I argue that the game meditates on precarity through a gendered lens.

I channel the giant woman's sublimity in Chapter 4 to explore Japan's post-postwar modernity through the video game *Death Stranding* (2019). By mixing different expressions and practices of the sublime, I consider how the game space becomes a site of meditation on the precarious condition of post-postwar Japan.

In Chapter 5, I dispel the giant woman by highlighting her ontological inconsistency through a focused reading on desire and femininity, as represented in *Paprika* (2006). The giant woman's body in *Paprika* as a site onto which anxieties are projected functions similarly to the giantesses in other perpetually apocalyptic texts. While She is a compelling agent who speaks to past trauma and future precarity, what she ultimately unveils is the patriarchal understandings of power, control, and identity. Through these steps, I dispel the magical uniqueness of the giant woman I set up in previous chapters.

Finally, Chapter 6 lingers on the feminine sublime and the abject to consider non-patriarchal considerations of finality or death in its many manifestations. Through a close reading of a feminist recontextualization of a femme fatale character – Fujiko Mine, in the animated television series *The Woman Called Fujiko Mine* (2012), I identify a different relationship to the irrepresentable or the other. Instead of overcoming or witnessing death, the animated series embraces death as a process and welcomes the erosion between the self and the other.

This dissertation uses the giant woman as a cipher for a turning point in Japan through the sublime. My approach illustrates femininity as an all-encompassing

metaphor for the other, which reveals the self as a patriarchal subject. My intervention challenges the universality and apolitical nature of imaginations of precarity, apocalypse, and civilization. Although the giant woman seems to be the ultimate expression of the threat posed to civilization, she only threatens the patriarchal configurations of control and power.

Sublime as an Aesthetic Condition, a Political Apparatus, and a Psychoanalytic Framework

Throughout my analyses of different expressions of femininity across various mediums, I centered on the sublime as an aesthetic condition, a political apparatus, and a psychoanalytic framework. My approach to the sublime is gendered. Sublime as an aesthetic articulates the irrepresentability of the unknown or the other. As a literary device, it describes the feeling of being simultaneously overwhelmed and elated. With these two registers and monster theory, the sublime becomes a fitting tool to understand the parade of monsters in postwar and post-postwar Japanese popular media. From the contradicting postwar sentiments that Godzilla embodies to the monstrous post-postwar angst, the mutating body in *Akira* represents the monster's body that reflects the cultural milieu of its time. The giant woman is another member of the monster parade who operates different modes of the sublime.

As a political agent, the sublime monsters reject event-closing narratives about past trauma and future precarity by exposing the irrepresentability of historical events and social realities. Like the indignant Godzilla, who melancholically challenges any

narrative closure to the atomic bombings by stomping on postwar Tokyo, the giant woman challenges the seemingly banal capitalist reality.

As a psychoanalytic framework, the sublime's foundation, built upon preexisting assumptions about the feminine, not only exposes the construction of patriarchal subjectivity but also provides language for feelings toward the other. Even though the Romantic conception of the sublime differs from the sublime object as theorized by Lacanian psychoanalysis, they operate within a dynamic between the self and the other.

By grouping these theories, I do not intend to prioritize the sublime as the theoretic umbrella that can cover all types of analyses of post-postwar Japanese media. Instead, the sublime connects the constellation of theories guiding my analyses. Through the sublime, I hope to provide a framework to understand perpetually apocalyptic texts as allegories of precarious social realities.

The Giant Woman's Shifting Body and Future

This dissertation centers on the giant woman as a world-ending entity that takes hold in post-postwar Japanese popular visual culture, but it is not an exhaustive list. Game designer Yoko Taro published several games set in perpetually apocalyptic worlds. Notably, in his directorial debut series, *Drakengard* (2013), the world-ending entity takes the shape of a giant feminine figure. Named Angel Mother, translated as the queen-beast (*haha tenshi*), the giant woman warps time and space around her. *Drakengard* is known for its multiple endings and the queen beast makes an

appearance in final ending titled “the End of dragon sphere,” or simply as Ending E. During an interview, Yoko Taro explained that Ending E pays homage to the film *The End of Evangelion*.¹ Given the context, one might make the visual comparison between EoE’s giant woman to the horrifying visage of the queen beast destroying Tokyo (figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1. A shaky camera captures the giant body of the queen beast.

The queen-beast’s destruction catalyzes Yoko Taro’s *Nier* (2010) and *NieR: Automata* (2017). The defeated body of the queen-beast by the end of *Drakengard* is shown teleported to Tokyo in *Nier*. Known as The Giant in the *Nier* series, the toxic remains of her body cause a global pandemic that petrifies and eventually wipes out humanity.

¹ Yoko Taro and Akira Yasui, The DRAG-ON DRAGOON (Drakengard) discussion reaches its climax. Yoko Taro reveals the dark side of “DOD2.” Director Yasui’s Feeling & Reflections on “Nier,” interview by Matsushita Tadatsugu, April 22, 2013, <https://dengekionline.com/elem/000/000/623/623508/>.

Nier's thematic resonance with other perpetual apocalyptic media secures the giant woman as a visual shorthand for calamity while sustaining the gendered configuration that comes with it. Interestingly, the second installment of the *Nier* series, *NieR: Automata*, interrogates humanity from the posthuman perspective. I argued elsewhere that using robots and androids as allegories of different conclusions about WWII, *Automata* explores alternative modes of existence in a world where humans no longer exist.²

The long-running manga and anime series *Attack on Titan* (2009 - 2023) also features titans that pose existential threats. One of the early defining moments of the series shows a feminine-coded giant killing the protagonist's mother by eating her. *Attack on Titan* amalgamates many of the perpetual apocalyptic stories examined in this dissertation. Young people train to fight titans, a typical formula of the shōnen genre. Eventually, many of them can transform into giants to fight back, like the mecha genre or even *EVA*'s Evangelion units. *Attack on Titan* has attracted popular and academic attention as a popular series due to its universal appeal and proximity to Japan's nationalist discourse. Indeed, the uncanny anatomy of the giant as a pilotable monstrous entity naturally welcomes monster theory.

The giant woman also exists in other forms of visual culture. A giant floating head of a woman appears in Tokyo in 2021. Titled "Masayume," the installation is a sizable

² Yasheng She, "Melancholic Vortex and Postwar Pacifism in *NieR: Automata*," *REPLAYING JAPAN 2* (March 2020): 147–55, <https://doi.org/10.34382/00013371>.

hot air balloon shaped like a woman's head, shaded in black and white, that floats over the Shibuya district of Tokyo without any prior notice. The artist collective "me" created the installation to grasp the lingering malady of the COVID-19 crisis. Their statement writes even as they begin to navigate this new reality, "the feeling of being real in our daily lives is as uncertain and unclear as if it were far into the future."³ Though not made explicit, their statement echoes the sense of precarity that defines post-postwar Japan.

These works demonstrate that the giant woman reflects many aspects of Japan's post-postwar modernity. As the social reality changes with time, the giant woman changes accordingly. As I write this dissertation, Hideaki Anno, director of the *EVA* franchise, released the final installment of the adaptation of his original series. Anno calls the new series "rebuilds" and introduces new characters and plotlines while adapting the original series. The "rebuilds" consists of four feature-length films that extend beyond the original story.

The giant woman enters the final film, where she embodies the end of the world again, though the context has changed drastically. First, the original stories, the series, and the film conclude with the Third Impact, yet the rebuild continues beyond the calamity. Pockets of humanity, including most of the main cast, survive to struggle, yet again, against the Final Impact. Rei/Lilith appears as the Final Impact

³ Valentina Di Liscia, "Giant Balloon Face Floats Over Tokyo," *Hyperallergic*, July 20, 2021, <http://hyperallergic.com/663886/giant-balloon-face-floats-over-tokyo/>.

commences, and this time, she is made even more uncanny as she is rendered as a 3D model with realistic features. Her blue hair and red eyes contrast staggeringly with the rest of the realistic human features on her face. Again, she offers a transcendental opportunity for our protagonist, Shinji.

Like the original series and film, we are shown Shinji's inner world connected to others. Instead of immediately deciding on the fate of humanity as he does in the 1997 film, Shinji reconciles with everyone in his life and helps them with their conflicts. Instead of killing his father, hence completing the oedipal symbolic order, Shinji reconciles with Gendo through mutual grief over Yui and ends with an embrace. Shinji moves on from the obsessive dependence on his former love interests: Kaoru and Asuka.

Shinji's final decision comes before a final interaction with Rei. This interaction is a thesis statement on the perpetual apocalyptic story and a metacommentary about the franchise's legacy on the industry and fandom. "You are the only one left," says Shinji and turns to Rei, who replies, "I am okay with being here." The pair stands on an empty set that is in the process of dismantling. Rei tells Shinji that she has always wished for a happy life for Shinji, and Shinji replies that he wants the same for her. Stills shots, strung together using quick cuts, display the filming apparatus scattered around the fictional set.

Shinji continues to state that he will not reverse time or the world with the power given to him. He will rewrite a new world without "EVA." A projection of title cards

from the original series and film overlay the two as Shinji makes his statement. It becomes evident that the “EVA” in Shinji’s declaration simultaneously signals the mecha and the franchise. Shinji’s desire to give Rei a life without *EVA* speaks to the heavy burden she bears in the narrative and the database consumption practices around her. Azuma’s database consumption begins with the reproduction and circulation of Rei without her original context. Categorized as a feminine figure with a “quiet personality, blue hair, white skin, mysterious power,” Rei becomes a collection of traits that can be replicated and consumed through database consumption.⁴ Perhaps by giving Rei a new context, the series unburdens her and returns Rei to her original context. A hope that is reflected through Rei returning to her original character design as she agrees to Shinji’s proposal of the new world. Shinji bids goodbye to Eva-01 and his mother and rebuilds the world while the giant woman again disintegrates. Shinji wakes up in the new world and finds himself inside a train station with Mari while a few familiar faces appear on the other side of the track. No longer teenagers, Shinji and Mari leave the station and march into the real world that looks exactly like ours. The film ends with aerial photos of Tokyo and a hopeful sendoff to all the characters. Yamada positions post-postwar coming-of-age

⁴ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, [English ed.]. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 52.

stories as exercises of identity construction free from postwar Japan's prescribed need for national growth.⁵

Considering *EVA's* influence on the *sekai-kei* genre and its perpetually apocalyptic setting, I believe that by allowing the cast to come of age and finally exist in the real world, Anno presents a different relationship to precarity. The endings of the original series and the film show Shinji choosing to either embrace precarity, or lack, by merging his identity with others or reject the symbolic solution to loneliness by becoming one of the last two survivors on Earth. In both cases, Shinji remains as a teenager. The rebuilds allow Shinji to live and grow with new challenges and other expressions of precarity as an adult. Though I cannot say that this ending speaks to the end of post-postwar precarity, it at least rejects database consumption and escapism as solutions to precarity.

The giant woman, like Rei, is a collection of reproducible traits that can be consumed but also interrogated to grasp the shifting social realities. As the writing of this dissertation, a teaser trailer of *Death Stranding's* sequel shows the mundane happiness of childrearing and people worshiping Amelia, the harbinger of calamity, which summons memories around Aum Shinrikyo, the doomsday cult behind the 1995 Tokyo subway attack. Though the game is still under development, the stitching of banality with sublime world-ending threats already conjures perpetual apocalyptic

⁵ Marc Yamada, *Locating Heisei in Japanese Fiction and Film*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2021), 128.

imaginings about our current world, where an encounter with the sublime through political conflicts, environmental crisis, and social unrest feels destined and imminent.

Looking at the troubles of post-postwar Japan presented in popular media through the sublime, I see the patriarchal subject as a process of constant distillation. The patriarchal subject optimizes itself by boiling away undesirable qualities (feminine) to transcend into a higher (implicitly masculine) existence. So long as the subject sees parts of itself as feminine that must be eradicated, it is trapped in a loop of perpetual optimization, boiling to its utter annihilation.

Appendix A: On the Different Sublime

Because the primary object of the sublime is irrepresentability, each theorization of the sublime orients differently according to its cultural, historical, and political milieu. This appendix contains a list of interpretations of the sublime mentioned in the dissertation.

Romantic Sublime

Romanticism often uses the sublime to describe the vastness of nature or the authority of the divine. To face the sublime is, thus, to welcome a "transcendental" opportunity – a prominent belief held by Romantic literary giants, such as Longinus, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Burke.

Postmodern Sublime

Postmodern theorists such as Jean François Lyotard do not consider the irrepresentable as a transcendental opportunity but confirm its immanence. Instead of overcoming the irrepresentable, the postmodern sublime does not aim to use the other as an opportunity for self-improvement but to bear witness to its otherness.

Nuclear Sublime

Many theories have used the term nuclear sublime. In this dissertation, I focused on Calum Lister Matheson's description of the term to refer to images of nuclear waste

and the impact craters because they "decenter humanity and disrupt the subject by revealing the vastness of the inhuman."⁶

Postnuclear Sublime

Alan Wolfe argues that "unlike for the West, postmodern means not nuclear sublime but postnuclear, and the issue is not whether survival is possible, but how to survive in what has always been recognized as a precarious existence."⁷ Wolfe goes on to posit that postnuclear sublime is more appropriate in the Japanese context.

Political Sublime

Michael J. Shapiro highlights the political affordance of the sublime by identifying and synthesizing natural, racial, nuclear, industrial, and 9/11 terror sublime in *The Political Sublime* (2018). Shapiro details how the sublime "lay siege to the institutionalized forms of quiescence and passivity that turn events into impregnable monuments."⁸

⁶ Calum L. Matheson, *Desiring the Bomb: Communication, Psychoanalysis, and the Atomic Age*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2019), 20.

⁷ Alan Wolfe, "Suicide and the Japanese Postmodern: A Postnarrative Paradigm?," in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H D Harootunian (United States: Duke University Press, 1989), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12103bc.14>, 230.

⁸ Michael J. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime*, Thought in the Act (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 172.

Technological Sublime

David Nye enacts the sublime to trace discussions around technological achievements in American history. He identifies the “technological sublime” concerning railroads and skyscrapers and the “electric sublime” exhibited by communication technologies.⁹ In other scholarships, the technological sublime is associated with the American sublime.

Digital & Virtual Sublime

Matthew Spokes paves the way for utilizing the sublime in video game analysis in his book, breaking down the virtual sublime into affective registers to explain moments in video games that are awe-inspiring, frightful, overwhelming, or simply sublime.¹⁰ Spokes stresses how virtual sublime encounters in video games persuade players to reflect on the present, which “are only achievable through types of play.”¹¹ Working within similar parameters but focusing on video games as an aesthetic form, Eugénie Shinkle finds the digital sublime in the blurry “boundary between the self and the machine.”¹² Shinkle observes the digital sublime's uniqueness, which “elevated

⁹ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), xv.

¹⁰ Matthew Spokes, *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games.*, First edition (Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 146.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹² Eugénie Shinkle, “Videogames and the Digital Sublime,” in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, ed. Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 94–108, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230391345_6, 95.

emotion in the banal.”¹³ Shinkle argues the digital sublime comes from a lack of “a consistent and uniform boundary between the self and the machine.”¹⁴

Feminine Sublime

Barbara Freeman conceptualizes the feminine sublime to counter the transcendental property of the sublime. Freeman argues that an encounter of the sublime conceives “excess only as a frightening (and feminine) other provides the occasion for a confrontation that enables the (masculine) self to confirm, or enhance, its own existence.”¹⁵ Freeman underlines the unchallenged gender-neutral façade of discourse on the sublime to uncover the sublime’s patriarchal undercurrent. Freeman uses “feminine” instead of “female” or “womanly” to reject assertions of innate sexual difference and to radically rearticulate the role of gender in the formulation of “an alternative position with respect to excess and the possibilities of its figuration.”¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*, [Pbk. ed., 1997]. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1997), 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

Appendix B: Creative Intervention

“By the Lighthouse”

I have demonstrated the metaphoric function of the giant woman at the end of the world through the cultural context of Japan’s “lost era,” the discourse of the sublime, and the lens of gender. The giant feminine form not only occupies Japanese visual culture but also unveils the patriarchal configurations of power and control, which sets the foundation of our imaginations of (post)apocalypse.

The giant woman is a member of the nuclear entity parade in Japanese visual culture, led by notable monsters such as Godzilla in the 1950s. Like her peers, she contributes to conversations about nuclear power, militarism, and the legacies of World War II.

The shadow of the Cold War, the stagnation of economic and demographic growth, the rise of neoliberalism, and various social and natural disasters cultivated a sense of precarity in the 1990s, often regarded as the onset of Japan’s “lost era.”

The giant woman made her remarkable entrance as the harbinger of the end during the ending sequence of *The End of Evangelion (EoE)* in 1997. She continues to appear in other perpetually apocalyptic fiction across mediums. As a product of the lost era, the giant woman speaks to reflections about the past and anxieties toward future precarity. By examining her metaphoric function, I argue that reasonings and imaginations of civilization’s demise are filtered through a gendered lens. Namely, she often appears in front of a male protagonist who shoulders the weight of the

world and presents herself as an opportunity for transcendence – a fundamental principle of the sublime.

My creative intervention brings the giant woman and her beholder together into a digital landscape to further contemplate her metaphoric function. What does it mean to share a space with calamity? How does one feel about a feminine metaphor of absolute power? Does femininity render annihilation comforting? These are some of the questions I propose through my project. This project contains several implementation phases and will continue beyond this dissertation’s completion.

Design Principle & Process

Many examples examined in this dissertation juxtapose anime-esque renderings of the giant woman with realistic images of city skylines (Satoshi Kon’s *Paprika* and Yoko Taro’s *Drakengard*) or the ocean. The uncanny contrast allows the giant woman to occupy the liminal space between reality and fantasy.

I intended to bring the giant woman to real life using Augmented Reality (AR). There have been successful examples, such as the Gorillaz’s Times Square experience called “Gorillaz presents.”¹ Using Google’s ARCore Geospatial API, the artists virtually bring the giant bodies of the band members to Times Square. Due to technical challenges, AR implementation will come later.

¹ Stevan Silva, “Gorillaz Turn the World into a Stage with Augmented Reality,” Google, December 14, 2022, <https://blog.google/products/google-ar-vr/gorillaz-maps-music-video/>.

Instead, I created a convincing landscape based on the West Cliff in Santa Cruz and placed the giant woman in the bay. I recreated the west cliff's shoreline using the Unreal Engine. Then, I blocked out a view of the lighthouse until it resembled the actual space (figure 8.1).

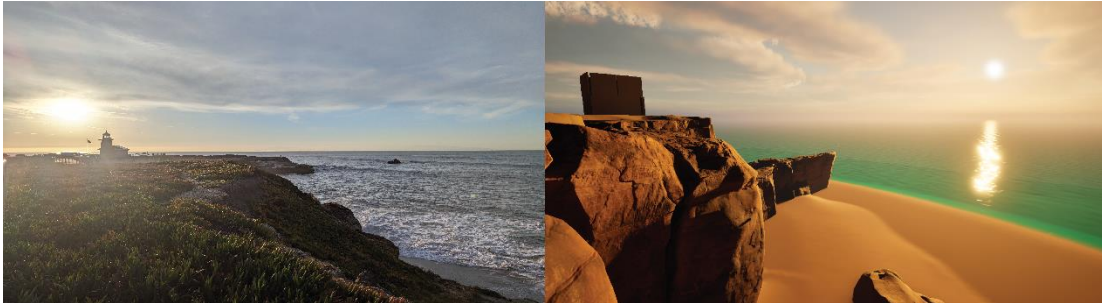


Figure 8.1. The virtual landscape (right) is modeled based on Lighthouse Point in Santa Cruz, CA.

I created environmental details based on images of the West Cliff. I purchased asset packages such as “Brushify” to create a believable landscape and “Ultra Dynamic Sky” to create a dynamic day-night cycle with appropriate lighting (figure 8.2).

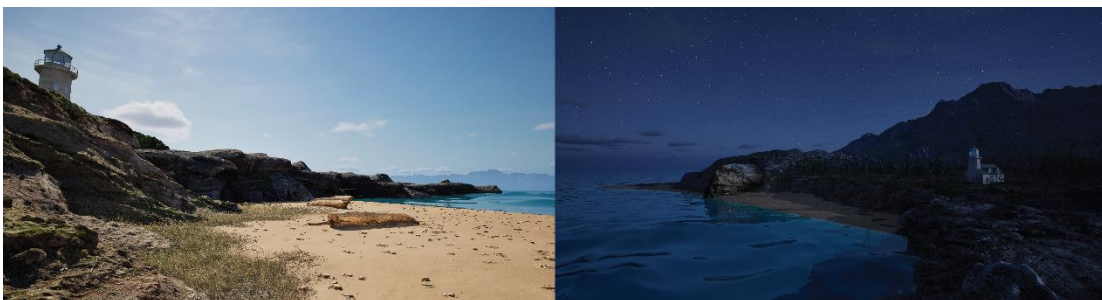


Figure 8.2. Day (left) and Night (right) views of the environment.

Environmental details must be balanced with performance because too many details would result in noticeable frame drops.

The Giant Woman

The primary design inspiration is the giant Lilith/Rei in the final sequence of *EoE*. Instead of a character resembling Rei, I created a model that still upholds the anime-esque quality. I added an armature to the model and rigged it so she could pose and be animated. She is given a semi-translucent appearance with an iridescent glow. Her light allows her to interact with the environment while retaining the “out-of-place” quality (figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3. A giant woman emerging from the depth of the ocean.

I used the 3D software “blender” to create the model, rig, and animation. I transferred the model and animation to the game engine “Unreal” and adjusted her to the scene. A full rendering of the scene can be located here.

Stages of Implementation

The project will have multiple phases. The current phase adopts Walking Simulator’s gameplay loop, which Mellisa Kagen defines as "exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space."² While there is no storyline or end goals, players can walk through the environment slowly as time passes.³ A giant woman will appear at night, which concludes the experience.⁴ The immediate next steps include implementing objects players can interact with and objectives that enhance the sense of banality and dwelling.

The next phase will implement Virtual Reality (VR) so that the scale of the giant woman can be experienced more vividly. Due to performance concerns, the VR environment will be the interior space of the lighthouse. The player can interact with objects and spend time inside the lighthouse until the giant woman appears.

² Melissa Kagen, *Wandering Games*, 1st ed., The MIT Press (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13856.001.0001>, 1.

³ A video rendering can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/934568353>.

⁴ A video rendering can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/934565264>.

The final phase will be an AR project where the giant woman can be projected into actual environment.

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