Newtypes, Angels, and Human Instrumentality

The Mecha Genre and its Apocalyptic Bodies

River Seager

Volume 4, Pages 219-243

Abstract: This article argues that the mecha genre is fixated on surrealistic and abstract imagery of supernatural human bodies, the destruction or transcendence of which often bring about new political and social epochs. In making this argument, it builds on the writings of Azuma Hiroki, and his understanding of classical mecha texts functioning as 'substitutes' for political grand narratives. Two major mecha texts are analyzed: *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979), and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). It is suggested that *Gundam*'s occult 'Newtypes' bridge the series' grand narrative space opera storyline with themes of New-Age mysticism, itself reminiscent of Azuma's writings on the role of spiritualism in postmodernity. In the section on *Evangelion*, it is argued that its imagery of bodily reorganization mirrors its fixation on reimagining its world and characters. The fixation on transcendent bodies in these texts is termed the "apocalyptic body", and it is suggested that this motif is used to express an uneasy and shifting relationship to political revolution.

Keywords: Mecha, Azuma Hiroki, Postmodernism, Grand Narratives, *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion,* Fandom.

Author Bio: Dr. River Seager is a film studies scholar specializing in the overlap between gender and genre. Their AHRC funded PhD explored the depiction of gendered archetypes in the work of Scottish screenwriter Alan Sharp. Alongside this, they are a video-essayist and visual artist, specializing in queer experience. Their recent documentary *I Am a Cyborg* (2023) explored the intersection between queer communities and anime fandom and debuted in 2023 at the Scottish Queer International Film Festival.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Generic License

cc BY NC

As one of the medium's most ubiquitous genres, it is unsurprising that several works within anime and manga studies have explored the social and cultural space occupied by mecha. Japanese cultural theorists such as Ôtsuka Eiji and Azuma Hiroki have been interested in the macro of these stories, making a case for the ways their operatic plot lines function as substitutes for lost grand narratives within postmodern Japanese society.[1] Anglophone writings on the subject have been more interested in the imagery of the mecha themselves, exploring how images of outsized mechanical forms function as metaphors for the human body and the masculine nature of these embodiments. For instance, *Mechademia* editor Frenchy Lunning argues that "mecha anime are generally narratives of male identity formation [...] 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."[2] Similarly, Susan Napier writes that "the mecha body clearly plays to a wish-fulfilling fantasy of power, authority, and technological competence," creating a design sensibility that "almost parodies the male ideal."[3] However, an underexplored aspect of mecha is the genre's tradition of supernatural and occult themes. This subject bridges both Japanese and Anglophone strands of thought. These occult elements involve themes of bodily transcendence and psychic joining, which reflects the points made by theorists like Lunning regarding the desire for unity in a genre that involves piloting massive mechanical bodies. In these works, images of outsized psychic bodies becoming nebulous and breaking down often signal a shift in their grand narratives. For instance, in the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise, psychic pilots known as "Newtypes" can temporarily join consciousness with others and experience a cosmic transcendence, often leading to political results. In the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* franchise, the narrative hinges on a plot to combine all of

CC BY NC

humanity into a single, unified consciousness, visualized through the mass breakdown of human bodies. It would seem then that running alongside the imagery of solid, mechanical robots are images of the human body becoming unstable, fluid, and giving way.

This article terms this concept "the apocalyptic body" and suggests it is often a signifier of revolution, apocalypse, or other changes in the series' cultural or societal frameworks. The apocalyptic body describes a fixation on supernatural, diffuse bodies often paired with a sense of metaphysical transcendence. This motif can be found in *Gundam's* space-psychics who go beyond their physical forms, or *Evangelion's* mutating angelic forms. They are often not easily merchandisable elements and stand in marked contrast to the genre's fetishistic interest in mechanical embodiments. Nevertheless, it is often through this imagery that these texts communicate their core themes around grand narratives. In early *Gundam* entries, this is an uneasy but mostly hopeful attitude towards youth mass movements. In *Evangelion*'s original works, there is a sense of oppressive social atomization and dislocation from society.

To explore this notion, this essay will look at these two major mecha texts, focusing on how they deploy imagery of the human body. It will start with *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979), exploring its depiction of Newtypes. In 1981, *Gundam* creator Tomino Yoshiyuki framed Newtypes as key to the series' themes: "This is a drama about questioning what it means to live. If we are to accept this question, we have no choice but to, with a deep hope and determination, seek out our own spiritual world (our New Type)."[4] This paper analyses the role and descriptions of Newtypes in Tomino's original *Gundam* series and his novelization of that series, arguing that they reflect a complex

CC BY NC

relationship to political revolution, one that is often visualized through the supernatural, diffuse Newtype form.

It then looks at *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). In Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2001), he famously contrasted *Gundam* and *Evangelion*, seeing *Gundam* as an attempt to replicate grand narratives and *Evangelion* as a series totally uninterested in them, fixated instead on "database-like" character elements. *Evangelion* is also a series that directly places itself in relation to *Gundam* fandom. Its Japanese title, *Shin Seiki Evangelion* (lit. *New Century Evangelion*), is a reference to the 1981 public event that announced the release of the *Mobile Suit Gundam* compilation movies: the "Anime Shinseiki Sengen" (Declaration for a New Anime Century). This event has been mythologized as a pivotal moment in the birth of 80s otaku culture. By titling their mecha series with this prefix, the creators at *Gainax* (itself often seen as a "fan-run" studio) implicitly suggested their work functioned as the manifestation and culmination of the otaku movement ushered in by said event. However, its parallel imagery of apocalyptic, occult bodies communicated a decidedly different political outlook.

Gundam and the "Newtype" Body

Released in 1979, the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* TV anime was directed by Tomino Yoshiyuki and produced by the studio *Sunrise*. It tells the story of a war in a future period called the "Universal Century." In this fictional setting, much of humanity has been expelled from Earth due to overpopulation and now lives in Space Colonies called "Sides." The series begins in the middle of a conflict, a war between a fascistic nation of breakaway Space Colonies, "The Principality of Zeon," and the "Earth Federation," a declining World Government. The series follows Amuro Ray and other

CC BY NC

members of the Earth Federation spaceship "White Base" as they fight in this war using giant mechanical exoskeletons called "Mobile Suits."

Several academic papers on *Gundam*—and on mecha in general—have explored how these Mobile Suits become interlinked with and representative of the human form. Anthony Dominguez writes that "the fragility of the real robot mirrors the fragility of the human body," arguing that this imagery of the body comes to be "linked to the nation of Japan, and so the body's own mutilation signals the metaphorical collapse of the Japanese border."[5] Frenchy Lunning argues that the image of a mecha is a visual metaphor, illustrating "a gap: a symbol of a yawning sense of lack suffused with a complex of narratives that lie between the child-pilot subject and his or her mecha-ideal image of power."[6] Similarly, Tatsumi Takayuki understands the appeal of *Gundam,* and other anime mecha works, through the lens of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," coining the term "Japanoid" to describe what he sees as a uniquely Japanese interest in robotic embodiments resulting from post-occupation cultural bifurcation.[7]

However, less attention has been paid to another central theme and concept of the original *Gundam* TV series—Newtype ideology. Just as many have argued for the importance of mechanical body imagery to *Gundam's* themes, through the concept of Newtypes, the series also explores the imagery of human bodies becoming transcendent, losing their initial forms. This imagery is heavily tied to the series articulating its fictional ideologies. Within the fiction of the series, Newtype ideology was a belief progressed by Zeon Zum Deikun, a political thinker and founder of the Zeon state. Newtypism is a vague concept, but the core of it is the belief that once living in space, humanity will undergo a societal and psychic transformation. Newtypism is not a term used in the series itself (which instead consistently refers to "Newtype ideology") but is

cc BY NC

being coined here for brevity. The *Mobile Suit Gundam* novelizations (published from 1979-1981 and written by series creator Tomino Yoshiyuki) feature a speech from Zeon Zum Deikun that more fully describes Newtypism as a concept. In his speech, Deikun states:

> If the first stage in mankind's evolution was his evolution from an ape to a human, and the second stage was his breakthrough from feudalism to the rational science of the Renaissance, then the third will be his transformation into a new type of human, a man with profound sensitivity and insight and a far greater awareness of the vastness of time and space.[8]

Still, this is a vague manifesto, and within the setting, it is interpreted in several different ways. Some characters see Newtypism as both a political and spiritual model. As one character puts it, a Newtype is someone intended to "symbolize mankind's potential for a universal 'renaissance.'"[9] Others see it as a justification for a racial hierarchy, signaling the supposed superiority of those living in space. As Zeon dictator Gihren Zabi says, when Deikun coined the term Newtype, "surely he must have been talking about us [the nation of Zeon], we're a superior race."[10]

It is well established that the original *Gundam* series was highly influenced by World War II. Scholar William Ashbaugh argues that "Tomino uses his science fiction movie *Gundam* to counter nationalistic, pro-war representations of the War in Japanese comics and animation."[11] In this vein, Newtypism seems to parallel several ideologies dominant during the war years. Its spiritual elements parallel multiple occult strands of thought popular in the inter-war periods. In particular, the fixation on extrasensory abilities can be seen as reminiscent of the widespread interest in theosophy in the United States before World War II. The way Newtypism becomes consolidated into Zeon's propaganda is also somewhat analogous to Nazi Germany's occult strands, such

cc BY NC

as the Thule Society. Also, its fascistic racial reading can be read as an allegory both for the Nazi's Aryan propaganda and Imperial Japan's version of said propaganda in the form of the "Yamato people" concept.[12] And, as Patrick Drazen notes in his discussion of the *Gundam* novels, "the notion of humans moving to higher [...] stages of evolution is found in Darwin, in Nietzsche, in most world religions (metaphorically at least), and in the trans-humanist movement."[13] Cultural anthropologist Azuma Hiroki argues that *Gundam*—and other science fiction anime from the period—fulfilled "the grand role of substituting for the real grand narrative (namely, political ideology)." [14] He suggests that at a time when the dominance of institutions like religion and political ideology were in retreat, science fiction anime like *Gundam* and *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974) allowed otaku communities to "compensate for the decline of grand narrative[s]," playing out simulations of political struggle in space opera settings.[15] Azuma was writing within the context of poststructuralist thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Deleuze, arguing that:

> In postmodernity grand narratives are dysfunctional; "god" and "society," too, must be fabricated from junk subculture. [...] In modernity, god and society secured humanity; the realization of this was borne by religious and educational institutions, but after the loss of the dominance of these institutions, what becomes of the humanity of human beings?[16]

Notably, Azuma points out that the term Newtype became adopted within anime fandoms to describe otaku communities. He brings up the example of cultural critic Okada Toshio, who "presented a redefinition of otaku as 'those who possessed an evolved vision'—a 'new type' of person responsive to the cultural conditions of a highly consumerist society,"[17] an act of discourse which Azuma describes as an "almost megalomaniacal claim" that "paradoxically reveals the extent to which otaku feared being typecast."[18] Regardless, Azuma's view of *Gundam* as a fictional grand narrative—a

CC BY NC

"supplement" for political ideology—mirrors well the role of Newtypes within the *Gundam* story. Newtypes function as a catch-all grand narrative, a Rorschach test of an ideology, fulfilling whatever role the speaker desires.

In the series itself, Newtypism becomes complicated by the emergence of Mobile Suit pilots with psychic powers, whom some see as manifestations of the concept. As the original *Gundam* anime reaches its final episodes, there is an escalation of surrealistic imagery brought on by these characters' abilities. This reaches its visual zenith in the character of Zeon pilot Lalah Sune. Lalah is presented as the most powerful Newtype in the series. Her powers allow her to remotely pilot drones called "Bits," making her an extremely deadly combatant. In episode 34, "A Fateful Encounter," Lalah and the main character, Amuro, briefly meet, and though they are on opposite sides of the conflict, they experience an instantaneous connection.

Then, in episode 41, "A Cosmic Glow," Amuro and Lalah experience a series of psychic connections during the heat of battle. In attempting to strike a killing blow on another enemy combatant, Amuro hits Lalah, eviscerating her instantly. At this moment, however, Amuro and Lalah's minds merge. The following sequence is surrealistic, with clear inspiration taken from the finale of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). A kind of non-linear space is presented in which Lalah and Amuro's bodies appear to dissolve. Within this space, Lalah and Amuro come to know and understand each other perfectly, without misconception. While experiencing a dramatic reverie—and appearing to reach metaphysical heights even more intense than Amuro's—Lalah says that she can see "even time itself." The accompanying scene of the mecha pilots' bodies dissolving into a series of formless, abstract imagery suggests that this transcendence comes at the cost of the body, or perhaps the body is a cage that prevents

cc BY NC

it. Either way, the destruction of Lalah's mecha armor and then her physical form allows entry into this state.

Thematically, the apocalyptic body of Lalah Sune is a fascinating counterpoint to the series' other central image: mechanical mecha. Whereas the mecha form is solid, powerfully demarcated, and metallic, Lalah Sune's Newtype form is nebulous, liquid-like, and transcendent. The visual collapse of her form in this Newtype state could easily appear ominous; instead, the effect is one of possibility and political change, her apocalyptic form pointing the way to potential new ontologies of humankind. As such, it seems important to consider the political conclusion of this original Gundam series and how it relates to this bodily imagery.

Figure 1. An example of fluid imagery during Lalah and Amuro's Newtype joining.

cc BY NC

In the anime, two episodes remain after this Newtype awakening, wrapping up the main conflict between Zeon and the Federation. The novels are structured slightly differently. While Amuro lives through the series, he dies at the end of the third novel. His death lets forth a massive psychic shockwave, allowing other characters to briefly connect as he and Lalah did. Just as in the case of Lalah, the dissolution of Amuro's apocalyptic body creates a psychic reverie brimming with revolutionary possibility. In this case, however, it has concrete political effects.

Within the novel, Amuro's death causes Char Aznable (a Zeon soldier and the son of Zeon Zum Deikun) and the remaining main characters to join forces and end the war. While the anime ends with the Zeon state defeated, the novels go further. The forces of White Base and Char establish a new Zeon state, still independent from the Earth Federation but liberated from fascist control. This new Zeon state is presented as only having been possible through the Newtype reverie caused by Amuro's passing. In a particularly charged scene from pilot Kai Shiden's perspective, Tomino writes:

> "Damn you, Amuro!" Kai sobbed bitterly. "Why'd you go off and get killed? And leave us?" […] He continued raging, but he knew that the things Amuro and the other MS pilots had speculated about were more than a dream. They were gradually coming true. The world they knew was changing. Amuro's exploding consciousness had affected everyone in the immediate area with [Newtype] potential, subtly creating a common thread of awareness even among sworn enemies. Intuitively, Kai knew that he was now linked by a new consciousness with [Char]. The universe, which for the last few seconds seemed to have frozen, was about to change.[19]

In the above excerpt, the spiritual concept of Newtypism is utilized to bring about political result. Azuma's writing has a similar fixation on the ways in which the occult and the political have overlapped. Azuma sees the "interest in occult thought and New Age science that grew in America during the 1970s" as the result of the baby boomer

CC BY NC

generation being “driven to forge the grand narrative that had been lost.”[20] In his view, 1970s occultism and New Age science were both attempts to recreate the structure of a central guiding ideology in much the same way otaku culture was: “The rise of otaku culture in Japan, too, of course shares the same social background.”[21] Newtypism, then, is the perfect embodiment of this welding of the occult and New Age science into a political ideology. Tonally, the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* functions in this way, using the supernatural-political concept of Newtypes to didactically ask the viewer to imagine new ways of envisaging human society. As John D Moore points out, “famously, the final words of the *Gundam* compilation films are a direct challenge to the young audience to form the course of our real world ‘And now, in anticipation of your insight into the future.’”[22] Subsequent *Gundam* series would take on a much more pessimistic tone regarding Newtypes. In the direct sequel, *Zeta Gundam* (1985), Newtypes have been consolidated into the military and are experimented on to maximize their fighting capability. That said, no sequels were planned when the original *Gundam* was produced, which is why this essay opts to understand the original on its own terms, attempting to appreciate its scenes of ecstatic Newtype reverie within the confines only of that original narrative and its parallel novelization.

The original ending still has an element of cynicism, particularly in the novelization. Throughout the novels, Kai Shiden is the White Base character most critical of the Federation government; he even suggests a coup once the war is over. However, after overthrowing the previous Zeon government, Kai watches Char Aznable (the previously mentioned son of Zeon Deikun) give a speech. In watching the speech, he realizes that Char is positioning himself as the head of the new Zeon state. In a sequence from Kai’s perspective, Tomino writes: “*Amuro*, he thought. *This is the way it*

CC BY NC

turned out. Suddenly he realized he hated [Char] Aznable."[23] We then learn in a brief epilogue that of all the major White Base characters, only Kai chose to remain in the Federation rather than joining Char's new Zeon. In this conclusion, Tomino depicts the spiritual enlightenment of Newtypism lovingly while leaving some room for cynicism towards its political outputs.

In discussing this note of cynicism, it seems pertinent to bring in the writings of theorist Ôtsuka Eiji. In looking at the formation of otaku culture, Ôtsuka argues that more emphasis should be put on the cultural fallout following the failure of several high-profile leftist student movements. He suggests that those who felt this ideological defeat went on to pour their energy into media and art seen as low by the culture at large. He writes:

> we should consider a little more the fact that the people coming up during and in the fallout of the two failed student movements that occurred in postwar Japan – the conflict over the US–Japan Security Treaty (anpo tôsô), or the Anpo movement, in the 1960s, and the All-Campus Joint Struggle League (zenkyôtô undô), or the Zenkyôtô movement, before and after 1970 – are not only the ideological defenders of the subculture that was established before 'otaku' culture, but also those who created the genres and set the stage for the first generation of 'otaku'. These defeated members of the student movement acquired nourishment to live from the lowest levels of the Japanese industry and media hierarchy, children's culture, or from TV, which was still of low status, or from underground media such as pornography magazines and 'pink films'.[24]

Notably, the key work Ôtsuka uses in this analysis of otaku culture is *Gundam*. He points out that director Tomino was an underclassman of leftist filmmaker Adachi Masao and that character designer Yasuhiko Yoshikazu was a New Left activist. In Ôtsuka's reading, *Gundam* is a cultural byproduct of a generation actively involved in revolutionary struggle, arguing that *Gundam* should be understood as "converted leftist culture (tenkô sayoku no bunka)."[25] Notice the historical weight this reading provides to

CC BY NC

the previously mentioned "Declaration for a New Anime Century." Said speech, performed to youthful college students in a public space, visually would appear similar to a leftist Anpo demonstration around 15 years earlier. But in this case, the students were gathered to hear a speech filled with references to a fictional "Newtype" ideology, a massive collection of allusions to historical grand narratives. More than anything, the conclusion of the *Gundam* novel trilogy seems to evoke this complex relationship to leftist thought that Ôtsuka identifies.

Lalah Sune and Amuro Ray's apocalyptic bodies are the clearest visual metaphor for this revolution. They are young, idealistic figures literally going beyond their physical forms to bring about political change. The imagery of a bodily breakdown becomes one of revolutionary possibility: a physical transcendence that represents, in microcosm, a potential revolution among the entire body politic. However, sequels to the original *Gundam* would go on to voice disappointment in revolution far more clearly than this youthful hope for change. In such cases, the imagery of the Newtype body, stretching out and becoming diffuse, takes on a far more sinister, pessimistic aura. This more foreboding relationship to transcendent bodily imagery would find particular expression in the mecha texts of the 1990s.

Evangelion as a Post-Newtype, "Grand Nonnarrative"

Neon Genesis Evangelion (1995) is a core anime text, often seen as the defining TV work of otaku subculture produced in the 1990s. Directed by Anno Hideaki, it concerns biomechanical weapons named Evangelions, piloted by teenagers who fight mysterious "Angels" against a backdrop of apocalypticism and teenage angst. Its imagery is often extreme, particularly due to its mecha not being mechanical objects but giant beings of flesh and blood (albeit internally piloted by our young mecha

CC BY NC

protagonists). Anthony Dominguez has noted that within the *Gundam* franchise, the "suturing, decapitation, and destruction of […] real robots reflect the breakdown of the human body."[26] *Evangelion* actualizes this notion: it is a series fixated on imagery of its biomechanical giants being impaled, mutilated, and otherwise experiencing grievous bodily harm. The result is eerie and gothic, often blurring the line between the genres of mecha and horror.

Commentaries on *Evangelion* often note its intertextual nature, characterized by its dialogue with biblical terminology, mecha anime, Japanese war cinema, and tokusatsu television. This sense of intertextuality is compounded by its metafictional qualities in which "the narration frequently breaks down, revealing that both the background/world and figure/story depend on a volatile set of narrative and imaginary choices, vague references, and simulations" (Ballús, Torrents).[27] Similarly, Mariana Ortega notes that the series is "a rumination and critique on its own nature as cultural and ideological product, art and artifice."[28] *Evangelion's* meta-textual nature is compounded by its unique depiction of apocalypse. Surrealistic images of humankind's transformation are contrasted with the highly interior psychodrama of the "Human Instrumentality Project" (referred to from here on as Instrumentality): an arcane ritual designed to combine all human life into a single being. However, this rendition of an apocalypse, which is uniquely articulated through images of the destruction of massive humanoid bodies, is part of a lineage of mecha imagery that stretches back to the original *Gundam* and Tomino's concept of Newtypism. The difference is in their political character. *Mobile Suit Gundam's* Newtypes act as sacrificial figures, their deaths bringing about large-scale political changes: the dissolution of the Principality of Zeon in the anime and the founding of a new Zeon-state headed by Char in the novels.

CC BY NC

In *Evangelion*, the creation of Lilith's body functions to combine all humankind into one being, and Shinji's rejection of that body also functions to reject this process, returning humankind to its previous embodiment. *Gundam*, then, is a work sometimes distrustful of linear historical development, whereas *Evangelion* seems to suggest that such linear historical development no longer exists.

Evangelion's apocalyptic imagery is layered in several references. For instance, *End of Evangelion's* (1997) final scene is reminiscent of the climax of *Space Firebird 2772* (1980), in which the hero and heroine find themselves on an empty beach after the world has been engulfed in flames. The depiction of Instrumentality as a nebulous subjective space in which characters experience a psychodrama, rendered in Dutch angles and fish-eye lenses, recalls the more expressionistic episodes of the series *Ultraman* (1966), particularly those directed by Jissoji Akio (a member of the often psychedelic "Japanese New Wave").[29] Furthermore, the violent nature of its finale, and its use of live-action footage, recall the conclusion to Tomino's follow-up to *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Space Runaway Ideon* (1980).

Figure 2. An example of End of Evangelion's towering angelic imagery

CC BY NC

However, Instrumentality's connection to *Gundam's* Newtype concept seems particularly strong. As previously explored, the scenes of psychic connection between Lalah and Amuro in *Mobile Suit Gundam* portray two characters letting go of their physical form to explore a dream-like, surrealistic landscape in which the standard rules of time and space do not apply. Like this process, Instrumentality is predicated on erasing the gaps between human forms. This is justified in the text as the breaking down of "AT Fields," which are responsible for separating the souls of individual beings. While the mechanics of Instrumentality only become apparent towards the end of the series, it is highlighted as a theme early on through an invocation of Arthur Schopenhauer's parable of the "hedgehog's dilemma." One character says hedgehogs desire to be with one another, but painful quills keep them apart—a fable for humanity's desire for intimacy conflicting with its fear of rejection. As the series goes on, Anno seems to direct this critique towards the otaku community, the audience most likely to consume *Evangelion* and who, in the philosophical framework of the series, would be seen as retreating into fantasy. Instrumentality violently resolves the hedgehog's dilemma: all of humanity becoming, as the series puts it, "one body, one soul." This is paralleled at several points with sexual intercourse, making an aspect that was implicit in Lalah and Amuro's joining overt. In *Gundam*, Newtypism was an act of spiritual awakening that occurred somewhat randomly through the chaos of war; in *Evangelion*, Instrumentality is a process put into place by powerful superstructures plotting behind the scenes. It is, as Betty Stojnic puts it, "'a conspiracy to rid humanity of its embodied and isolated form."[30] This is a considerably more cynical and pessimistic depiction of human evolution than *Gundam's*. This pessimism seems indicative of their respective political moments. *Gundam*, as Ôtsuka notes, came from a generation who had experienced

CC BY NC

failed leftist student movements but also maintained some of the optimism of those collective struggles. *Evangelion*, on the other hand, is a firmly "lost decade"' work: not only is there a distrust towards political grand narratives, but there is also an antipathy and disinterest toward any attempt at political change.

For instance, compare the respective series' depiction of bodily transcendence. In *Gundam*, the scene in which Lalah and Amuro go beyond their physical form is presented as a pleasurable awakening into a true reality. *Evangelion* similarly involves all of humanity collapsing into formlessness: an orange/red liquid that spreads over the earth, but it is considerably more ominous in tone. During the ritual of Instrumentality, Ayanami Rei grows to enormous heights, collecting human souls above the Earth. During said ritual, a third eye violently splits on her forehead and is then stabbed by a crucifix – a strange inversion of transcendent imagery. When Shinji rejects Instrumentality and grants humanity the ability to choose whether or not to accept the process, Ayanami's body splits apart and crumbles over the now-red landscape of Earth. As established in the previous section, the apocalyptic bodies of the original Gundam series were used to construct a sense of youthful revolution, the nebulous forms of the Newtypes mirroring the ideological struggles of that series. In contrast, this apocalyptic body—the mutilated, massive form of Ayanami Rei—seems to have a much more uneasy relationship to mass struggle.

As previously mentioned, Azuma saw *Gundam* as an archetypical otaku "grand narrative". In contrast, he viewed *Evangelion* and its success as representative of the moment in which otaku became disinterested in those kinds of stories. This is an easy enough claim to understand: whereas *Gundam* tells a story of warring factions with discrete ideologies, technological weapons, and motivations, *Evangelion's* world is

CC BY NC

shrouded in an intentional mystery. For instance, the true origins of the Angels, the series' primary antagonists, is unclear from the anime alone. By the end of the series, vital plot elements are obscured, and the framework between reality and fiction is shrouded. As Azuma writes, "numerous fans of *Gundam* desired the completion and close examination of a singular *Gundam* world [...] they preserved the current passion for a fictitious grand narrative."[31] On the other hand, "even during the peak of the craze, the fans of *Evangelion* who appeared in the mid-1990s—especially those of the younger generation (the third generation of otaku)—did not really have a concern for the entire world of *Evangelion*."[32]

Azuma goes on to juxtapose the fandom's disinterest in the macro world of *Evangelion* with its granular interest in characters like Ayanami Rei. Azuma understands the fandom of *Evangelion* as oriented around the desire to create databases of "moe" character elements. Azuma explains that whereas *Gundam's* fictitious space history was built upon by several sequels, *Evangelion* was not designed to facilitate this further linear story progression. Instead, its parent company, *Gainax*, focused on developing merchandise for specific characters. Azuma states: "for instance, there are mahjong games, erotic telephone card designs [...] and even simulation games in which players nurture the heroine Ayanami Rei."[33] He describes this approach as a grand *nonnarrative* and focuses in particular on how it imagined alternate versions of Ayanami Rei. Azuma points out that Ayanami set a template for characters to be "broken into *moe*-elements and recorded by consumers."[34] He describes this moe-database process not as a series of linear influences ("[i]t does not seem wise to attribute this expanse to the "influence" of *Evangelion*"),[35] but instead as an act of constant

CC BY NC

reshuffling "sustained by the movements back and forth between the characters (the simulacra) and the *moe*-elements (the database)."[36]

This "quite postmodern consumer behavior"[37] is reflected in the imagery of *End of Evangelion*. Ayanami, in the form of Lilith, grows to enormous heights, outsizing even the Evangelions themselves. Then, in an arcane ritual, her externalized, gigantic body is reshuffled and reorganized by the structures of SEELE. It is through this reorganization and reimagining of her apocalyptic body that Instrumentality can occur. It is not that *Evangelion* lacks a grand narrative—the forming of all humanity's consciousness into one being is a transcendental awakening far beyond even Lalah and Amuro's joining. Nevertheless, it is a text that ultimately rejects this structure, with Shinji choosing to reverse the process of Instrumentality. Notably, the choice to halt this process is illustrated through the imagery of Ayanami crumbling apart and dissolving, her gigantic form disassembled above an apocalyptic vision of the earth. Ayanami's apocalyptic body is destroyed in an act that undoes a radical reconfiguration of humankind, an inversion of the ways in which Newtype imagery was used to accelerate political change.

In *Mobile Suit Gundam*, the sacrifice of individual Newtype bodies (Lalah, Amuro), leads the way to a revolutionary output. In *End of Evangelion,* an attempt to shift the nature of humankind on a mass level is rejected, but no revolutionary alternative is proposed. This is conducive to Azuma's understanding that *Gundam* occurs at the tail-end of belief in transformative grand narratives, whereas *Evangelion* emerged when such narratives had become firmly dispersed and individual database choices filled the void left. In both cases, however, it is through the reorganization of the body that their respective relationships to revolution are made clear.

CC BY NC

Conclusion: The Apocalyptic Body

The mecha genre is fixated on images of unstable, diffuse, human bodies—a fixation this article has termed the apocalyptic body. It is often through these apocalyptic bodies that the genre communicates its relationship to political revolution, with the destruction or transcendence of these forms bringing about new political, societal, and cultural frameworks. The original *Mobile Suit Gundam* uses its concepts of Newtypes to explore this bodily imagery. The Newtype's ability to sense the space around themselves accelerates into imagery of their bodies becoming nebulous, and through the death of Lalah, the series presents surrealistic imagery. In the novels, this is compounded even further by the death of Amuro and the resulting psychic shockwave, which leads to a coup within the Zeon Government. The dissolution of the apocalyptic body leads to a new political framework in the Earth Sphere.

In *Evangelion*, we have the apocalyptic body at its most overt. Not only are the mecha themselves now bio-organic, but the series fixates on images of their mutilation, impaling, and general physical destruction. The effects of this outsized body horror could not be more dramatic. *End of Evangelion's* climactic apocalypse has the effect of shifting the ontology of all humankind. This apocalypse is presented as a kind of ritual for which the key is reconfiguring the form of Ayanami Rei. Ayanami is the key apocalyptic body of the 1990s, rearranged and reformed in various reimaginings of the series (both official and unofficial). At the climax of the work, she is reformed through the ritualistic act of Human Instrumentality. However, the climatic destruction of her form leads to a rejection of an imposed grand narrative, and a return to stasis.

CC BY NC

In her discussion of the mecha genre, Susan Napier contrasts the masculine-coded world of mecha and the feminine-coded world of the occult. She writes:

> In contrast to the abjected feminine worlds of the gothic and the occult, which privileged women's bodies and their terrifying potential to engulf the male inside dark, organic spaces, the worlds of mecha might be seen as stereotypically masculine in their emphasis on hard-edged, thrusting, outward-orientated power, privileging what scholar Claudia Springer calls "the violently masculinist figure"[38]

However, as Newtypism and Instrumentality illustrate, the mecha genre has its own flirtation with the "dark, organic worlds" of the occult. In mecha, the unstable, shifting nature of the supernatural body provides a pointed contrast to a world of mechanical force and solidified empowerment. Still, the genre's relationship to these fluid, occult bodies is ambiguous: at times, in awe of their ability to birth new frameworks, and at times, in fear of it.

cc BY NC

Notes:

[1] See: Ôtsuka Eiji and Marc Steinberg, "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative," *Mechademia* 5 (November 2010): 99-116, and Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animal* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[2] Frenchy Lunning, "Between the Child and the Mecha," *Mechademia*, 2 (December 2007): 281.

[3] Susan Napier, *Anime From Akira to Howl s Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 86.

[4] Tomino, Yoshiyuki, translated by Sean Chapman, Jonathan Lack "The Shinjuku Declaration," Twitter, April 25, 2023., https://twitter.com/JonathanLack/status/1647056838683398144 (accessed April 20th, 2023).

[5] Anthony Dominguez, "Mechapocalypse: Tracing Gundam s Global Appeal and Fandom," *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*, 3 (December 2022): 256.

[6] Lunning, "Between the Child and the Mecha," 269.

[7] Takayuki Tatsumi and Christopher Bolton, *Gundam* and the Future of Japanoid Art," *Mechademia*, 3 (November 2008): 191–198.

[8] Yoshiyuki Tomino (trans. Frederik Schodt), *Mobile Suit Gundam: Escalation* (Houston: Del Ray, 1990), 9.

[9] Tomino, *Escalation*, 7.

[10] Tomino Yoshiyuki (trans. Frederik Schodt), *Mobile Suit Gundam: Awakening* (Houston: Del Ray, 1990), 49.

[11] William Ashbaugh, "Contesting Traumatic War Narratives: *Space Battleship Yamato* and *Mobile Suit Gundam*" in David Stahl and Mark Wiliams, eds., *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 346.

[12] For more on this topic, see: Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Ethnic Engineering: Scientific Racism and Public Opinion Surveys in Midcentury Japan," *Position: Asia Critique,* 8 (Fall, 2000): 499–529.

[13] Patrick Drazen, "Review: The Shock of the Newtype: The 'Mobile Suit Gundam' Novels of Tomino Yoshiyuki," *Mechademia,* 1 (December 2006): 177.

[14] Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan s Database Animal* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 34.

[15] Ibid., 35.

[16] Ibid., 29.

[17] Ibid., 5.

[18] Ibid.

CC BY NC

[19] Tomino Yoshiyuki (trans. Frederik Schodt), *Mobile Suit Gundam: Confrontation* (Houston: Del Ray, 1991), 77.

[20] Azuma, *Otaku: Japan s Database Animal,* 35.

[21] Ibid.

[22] John D. Moore, "*Turn A Gundam* and the Problems of (Dark) History," *Mechademia* conference, September 25, 2016.

[23] Tomino, *Confrontation,* 95.

[24] Ôtsuka Eiji, "Foreword: Otaku Culture as 'Conversion Literature,'" in Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam and Björn-Ole Kamm, eds., *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), xvii.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Dominguez, "Mechapocalypse: Tracing Gundam s Global Appeal and Fandom": 248.

[27] Andreu Ballús and Alba G. Torrents, "Evangelion as Second Impact: Forever Changing That Which Never Was," *Mechademia*, 9 (November 2014): 286.

[28] Mariana Ortega, "My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in 'Neon Genesis Evangelion,'" *Mechademia*, 2 (December 2007): 217.

[29] See: Alicia Haddick, "Anti-Society and Spirituality in 1960s Japan: Akio Jissoji's Buddhist Trilogy – Your Japanese Film Insight #23", *OtaQuest*, 19 February 2021, https://www.otaquest.com/akio-jissoji-buddhist-trilogy-japanese-film-insight/ (accessed April 20 2023).

[30] Betty Stojnic, "Boy with Machine: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Critique of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*," *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* 2 (November 2021): 29.

[31] Azuma, *Otaku, 37.*

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 52.

[35] Ibid., 51.

[36] Ibid., 53.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Napier, *Anime From Akira to Howl s Moving Castle*, 87.

cc BY NC

Bibliography

Ashbaugh, William, "Contesting Traumatic War Narratives: *Space Battleship Yamato* and *Mobile Suit Gundam*" in William Ashbaugh, in David Stahl and Mark Wiliams, eds., *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 327–353.

Azuma, Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animal* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Ballús, Andreu, Torrents, Alba G., "Evangelion as Second Impact: Forever Changing That Which Never Was," *Mechademia*, 9 (2014): 283–293.

Clements, Jonathan, *Anime: A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Dominguez, Anthony, "Mechapocalypse: Tracing Gundam's Global Appeal and Fandom," *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*, 3 2022: 240–263.

Drazen, Patrick, "Review: The Shock of the Newtype: The 'Mobile Suit Gundam' Novels of Tomino Yoshiyuki," *Mechademia,* 2 (2006): 174–177.

Lunning, Frenchy, "Between the Child and the Mecha," *Mechademia*, 2 (2007): 268–282.

Moore, John D., "*Turn A Gundam* and the Problems of (Dark) History," *Mechademia* conference, September 25, 2016.

Napier, Susan, *Anime From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Ortega, Mariana, "My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in 'Neon Genesis Evangelion,'" *Mechademia*, 2 (2007): 216–232.

Ôtsuka, Eiji, Steinberg, Marc, "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative," *Mechademia*, 5 (2010): 99–116

Ôtsuka, Eiji, "Foreword: Otaku Culture as 'Conversion Literature,'" in Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam and Björn-Ole Kamm, eds., *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), xiii–xxix.

Stojnic, Betty, "Boy with Machine: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Critique of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*," *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies,* 2 (2021): 27–56.

cc BY NC

Tatsumi, Takayuki, Bolton, Christopher, "*Gundam* and the Future of Japanoid Art," *Mechademia*, 3 (2008): 191–198.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Ethnic Engineering: Scientific Racism and Public Opinion Surveys in Midcentury Japan," *Position: Asia Critique,* 8 (2000): 499–529.

Tomino, Yoshiyuki, (trans. Frederik Schodt),
- *Mobile Suit Gundam: Awakening* (Houston: Del Ray, 1990).
- *Mobile Suit Gundam: Escalation* (Houston: Del Ray, 1990).
- *Mobile Suit Gundam: Confrontation* (Houston: Del Ray, 1991).
- "The Shinjuku Declaration," translated by Sean Chapman, Jonathan Lack, accessed via *Twitter*, April 25, 2023., https://twitter.com/JonathanLack/status/1647056838683398144 (accessed April 20th, 2023).

Filmography

Ultraman, dev. Tsuburaya Eiji (Tsuburaya Productions, 1966)

2001: A Space Odyssey, dir. Stanley Kubrick (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968)

Space Battleship Yamato, dir. Matsumoto Leiji (Academy Productions, 1974)

Mobile Suit Gundam, dir. Tomino Yoshiyuki (Sunrise, 1979)

Space Runaway Ideon, dir. Tomino Yoshiyuki (Sunrise, 1980)

Space Firebird 2772, dir. Tezuka Osamu, Sugiyama Taku (Tezuka Productions, 1980)

Neon Genesis Evangelion, dir. Anno Hideaki (Gainax, 1995)

End of Evangelion, dir. Anno Hideaki (Gainax, 1997)

cc BY NC