Throughout the year we continue to feature keynote addresses and selected papers from the ASIANetwork Conference 2002.

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Keynote Address: *Into the Labyrinth: Technology, Modernity and Apocalypse in Japanese Animation*
Susan J. Napier., University of Texas-Austin

My talk today concerns technology and apocalypse in Japanese animation in relation to modernity in general. Both these subjects are treated in vast and memorable detail in *anime*, (Japanese animation). In the West, animation is often disparaged as a children's medium, but in Japan *anime* covers an enormous range of topics. Partly because of the unique properties of the medium itself, it is particularly well suited to dramatize fantasy and science fiction, genres which often deal with questions related to my topic.

I would like to structure today's talk around two questions. The first is from John Treat's superb book, *Writing Ground Zero*, about the literature of Hiroshima survivors. The question is "How do we convey the unconveyable?" Treat's question is of course in reference to apocalypse, to world-ending events such as Hiroshima where 400,000 people were incinerated in a few seconds: how *do* you convey that—through testimony, through

writing, through pictures, through film? In our own time we have seen numerous attempts to do this in a variety of media, from the writings of the Holocaust survivors to Picasso's *Guernica*.

But Treat's question is equally interesting and important when it comes to technology as well. It's now a truism to point out the overwhelming impact of technology in our lives, not only technology per se, of course, but the speed, the sophistication and variety of technological change which can leave us breathless, almost helpless, unable to process what is going on. But it is a truism that is worth repeating. And, again, it is worth asking — how do we convey these dizzying changes, these formidable impacts on our lives? Part of my talk today, therefore, will be about how Japanese animation conveys the unconveyable. But, I want to first talk a little bit more about how we present the horror of apocalypse or the overwhelmingness of change on a more general level.

When I was asked to give this talk I think it was only a few weeks (maybe even less) after September 11 and of course

I, like everyone else, was immersed in the sea of articles and newscasts about the tragedy. But partly for my own interest, and also partly in preparation for this talk, I began to collect articles about the event that were of a particular type—articles that explore the problem of how we create art after a catastrophe of this magnitude. Indeed, there was a certain amount of hand wringing frustration detectable in the weeks following the event. People (or at least newspaper and magazine writers) seemed to be looking for artists to deal with or treat in some meaningful way the experience of catastrophe, and seemed impatient when the artists didn't leap immediately to the task. This struck me as a little impatient, for it seemed obvious that dealing artistically with what scholars of apocalypse call "world-ending events" takes time, and that often the best and most creative meditations on such an event can come years later. I certainly believe that this is true in Japan in both "high" and "popular" culture, where representations of cataclysm have become increasingly complex and sophisticated the further time has moved since Hiroshima.

There were other approaches to the problem of representation as well. On March 13, 2002 the New York Times reported on a symposium entitled "The Apocalyptic Imagination: Daydreaming in an Era of Nightmares" in which three writers were paired with their very own psychoanalysts, especially selected to analyze their fiction. The symposium revolved around "the question of fantasy after September 11. Can writers still allow themselves to have apocalyptic fantasies or are there new limits?" This seemed to me a rather shallow question. Of course people are going to go on having and creating apocalyptic fantasies and for some very good reasons, two of which came up in the symposium itself. The first was the author Jim Wolf's explanation that he wrote about apocalypse because he had a "fascination with catastrophe, a boyish enthusiasm of destruction." It's "cool," he said.

Perhaps even more insightful was the writer Robert Stone, author of *Damascus Gate*, who said, "What happens to characters happens to them so that it doesn't happen to me. I buy off catastrophe." (both quotations from *The New York Times,* March 13, 2002)

I think these are both comments that are worth taking seriously. Undoubtedly, Wolf's point about a "fascination with catastrophe" is a central reason behind why there are so many representations of catastrophe. Catastrophe, if it is not happening to us, can be "cool", it can be liberating, even sensuous, what Robert Lifton[1] describes as "The orgiastic excitement of the wild forces let loose." We can even perhaps posit an "erotics of destruction" in relation to the representation of catastrophe, and certainly many Japanese animations seem to play into these erotics—there is a kind of sensuous pleasure in watching how animation can convey destruction.

The other comment concerning the "buying off" of catastrophe is equally important. Catastrophe is "cool" at an aesthetic distance but it also fundamentally terrifying—disturbing us at the most basic core of our being, our desire for security. Not simply by writing about it but also by reading it, viewing it, or experiencing it vicariously, the reader/viewer does not just "buy it off," he or she also *works it through*. By getting on the roller coaster ride that the catastrophic text inevitably embodies, the audience can experience and share the terror, but, most importantly, at the end of the ride they can get off the roller coaster. Clearly, in this argument the representation of catastrophe is a therapeutic event. And again, this is very appropriate when it comes to Japanese animation which in many ways can be seen as working through the trauma of the atomic bomb, even if the threat of the bomb is represented in an ever more complex and displaced form.

Now, I mentioned when I began this talk that there were two questions I wanted to use as a framework. We have discussed the problem of conveying the unconveyable but I'd like to turn now to another problem: If we are able to convey the unconveyable, how do we ensure that we get a response? How do we go beyond mere temporary sensation to force the reader/viewer to actually be moved to think about what is being conveyed?

In reference to this question I found a very interesting essay by Thomas de Zengotita[2] in the April, 2002 *Harper's* magazine entitled "The Numbing of the American Mind", in which he, too, inevitably references September 11 but this time as a problem of response. He begins with the question, "How often did you hear, how often did you say, 'Since the events of 9/11?'" and continues, "A new idiom has been deposited in the language, approaching the same place of habituality as 'By the way,' or 'on the other hand.' And in the process we got past it all. Six months or so was all it took."

Zengotita is talking about the problem of psychic numbing, of moving on because "what else can we do?" but he also brings up this problem in relation to technology. As he says:

"Here's the basic situation. On the one hand: the Web, satellite cable TV, Palm Pilot, DVD, Ethernet—Virtual Environments everywhere. On the other hand, cloning, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, robotics—Virtual beings everywhere. Someday when people (or whatever they are) look back on our time, all this will appear as a single development called something like "The Information Revolution." This is not science fiction, this is really happening. Right now, in an Atlanta hospital, there is a quadapeligic with his brain directly wired to computer. He can move the cursor with his thoughts. The moving cursor doesn't need explaining—it comes down to digital bytes and neurochemical spikes—but what needs explaining is our equanimity in the face of staggering developments. How can we go about our business when things like this are really happening? How long before we start taking [such developments] in stride? About six months?"

Those of you familiar with *anime* will recognize in

de Zengotita's examples many tropes very common to *anime,* and it is certainly the case that much science fiction *anime* revolves around these very ideas. The bed and the cursor sound a lot like Otomo Katsuhiro's dystopian satire on old age, *Rojin Z*, while cloning, codes, AI, and virtual beings are integral parts of such science fiction films and series as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Serial Experiments Lain*. And in the fantasy space of animation these elements often appear in ways that evoke a response that forces the viewer to actually think, perhaps even beyond six months!

In fact it is my contention that *anime* is not only particularly suited to convey the unconveyable but also, and perhaps surprisingly, it can challenge the problem of psychic numbing. *Anime* texts can and frequently do evoke a response far beyond simply "Wow, cool!" I say "perhaps surprisingly" because *anime* is a medium in which it is very easy to lose oneself in the sensuous pleasure of its sheer fluidity and ability to display an endless variety of transforming images, to "convey the unconveyable" at a most basic level, without the need of complicated or expensive special effects. But one might not expect it to be a medium that could evoke the genuinely complex response which de Zengotita is calling for.

In fact however, *anime* is more than surface images. Although, as with all popular culture phenomena there is much that is low quality, the best of *anime* offers sophisticated and moving narratives, intriguing and often notably three-dimensional characters, and even memorable philosophical visions that do indeed evoke viewer response at a variety of sophisticated levels. Fundamentally, I would like to argue that *anime* deals with catastrophe and technological trauma in much more provocative and stimulating fashion than most Hollywood live action films.

I'd like to turn now to some concrete examples of the treatment of apocalypse and technology in *anime*, (of course they are very much interrelated) but, before I do, I'd like to offer a brief example of an American treatment of the same issues, the film *Armageddon*. This is a film in which the Earth is menaced by a comet and the only people who can save the day are a feisty group of oil riggers (led by Bruce Willis) who are willing to go out to the comet and blow it up. This being a Hollywood film, they of course succeed, but at the cost of the Bruce Willis character's life, as he stays behind to blow up the comet and himself, thereby saving the earth.

In certain ways *Armageddon* is fascinatingly comparable to a 1970's Japanese film and television series known as *Space Battleship Yamato* (*Uchu Senkan Yamato*). In the film *Farewell Yamato* the earth is menaced by a gigantic white comet which conventional weapons are incapable of dealing with. The only hope, it seems, is the *Yamato*, a spaceship that is actually a refitted version of the gigantic battleship *Yamato* that was sunk off the islands of Okinawa in the last days of the Pacific War. Piloting the *Yamato* are a feisty group of young people led by the handsome Susumu Kodai who is aided by two older characters, one of whom is actually the ghost of the *Yamato*'s former captain. In the film's

powerful ending the crew realizes that the only hope of exploding the comet is for a suicide mission into its heart. Kodai insists on piloting the *Yamato* alone, with two exceptions— his dead girlfriend, Yuki, whose body he embraces as he puts the ship into attack mode, and the spectral presence of the ghosts of former *Yamato* captains who surround him on the spaceship's bridge as he aims for the heart of the comet. As somber military music plays, the *Yamato* is sucked into the comet's heart. The film ends in utter silence with a single long held shot of a white radiance that fills the screen.

Yamato and *Armageddon* contain some notable similarities. Both are essentially apocalyptic films in which the world is menaced by a comet. Both contain, for their times, quite exciting special effects but with an emphasis on the human dimension, especially father figures. Most importantly, both portray examples of sacrifice.

But if we compare the endings we see how very differently sacrifice is narratively configured. In the American film we have a brief vision of the Bruce Willis character pushing the button and the subsequent explosion of the comet, not dissimilar from *Yamato's* conclusion. But *Armageddon* does not end there. Instead, the last ten minutes of the film are packed with "feel good" emotional high points. The crew returns to earth amid much waving of the American flag (from all corners) of the world while the soundtrack swells with inspiring music. The last scene is a wedding in which the daughter of the Bruce Willis character marries the most handsome member of the crew. The audience is able to leave the theater in a euphoric state, aware that great enterprise requires sacrifice, but certain that the sacrifice has succeeded, and cushioned by an ending that emphasizes renewal and optimism.

In contrast to the celebratory tone of *Armageddon's* finale, the ending of *Farewell Yamato* would seem to most Americans to be a both downbeat and ambiguous. Instead of a wedding we have a young captain and a corpse, and instead of a clear resolution we can only assume/hope that the comet has been destroyed. The silence and the white light of the film's ending refuse to give the viewer the emotional comfort that Armageddon's vision of music, a church wedding, and happy smiles provides.

I emphasize these differences between the films, not as a criticism of American culture, but rather as a key to understanding different cultural reactions to catastrophe. In many ways *Armaggedon* demonstrates some important strengths in American culture. We are an optimistic country that wants happy endings that accentuate the "positive" rather than the "tragic."

The only problem is that this outlook may make it harder for us to deal well with tragedy. And sometimes tragedy happens. But when it does, American culture seems to prefer to move on and this "moving on" may be what de Zengotita refers to as psychic numbness. In contrast, the Japanese visions do not allow us to move on nearly so easily. They insist in rubbing our noses in pain and suffering, emphasizing both the sadness and the necessity of sacrifice

even, or perhaps especially, when we don't know whether there will be a happy ending.

I'd like to give you some other examples of *anime* dealing with catastrophe and with technology (often combined) especially in relation to their often ambiguous endings. One of the important treatments of technology and apocalypse is the 1988 film *Akira,* perhaps the most famous apocalyptic film ever to come out of Japan. In this dark, but also viscerally exciting work, it is humans who usher in technological catastrophe. In this case, a group of scientists whose experiments on psychic children first bring about World War Three, and then create a telekenetic mutant, (a teenage outsider named Tetsuo) whose rampages threaten to create a new universe. For much of the film, *Akira* presents a sustained vision of the erotics of destruction as Tetsuo rampages through "Neo Tokyo," destroying everything around him while he himself transmogrifies into a grotesque gigantic infant. For many viewers (especially young males, perhaps), Tetsuo's symphony of destruction is undoubtedly "cool," wrought with memorably grotesque images of demolition, dissolution, and a kind of exultant despair.

Tetsuo is ultimately stopped before he totally destroys the city and, potentially, the earth, but, as with *Yamato*, the ending inspires more questions than answers. It may be that Tetsuo is simply regrouping his powers for something infinitely greater—the construction of a new universe. The film ends with a shot of a single massive eye while a voice-over intones "I am Tetsuo." Perhaps this is a sign of rebirth, but, given Tetsuo's problematic personality, most viewers are more likely to be disturbed than gratified by this.

My next example is *Ghost in the Shell*, *(Kokaku kidota)* a film about a female cyborg who longs for a "ghost," essentially a soul. Less explicitly apocalyptic than *Yamato* or *Akira,* the film is more of a metaphysical exploration of world-ending possibilities. It is also a brilliant vision of the promise and the threat of technology, as the cyborg's quest involves issues that explicitly foreground the dynamic between the spiritual and the scientific, and the animate and the inanimate. Far more lyrical and ruminative than either of the other films, the narrative dwells on the loneliness of the cyborg, metanymically suggesting, through a visually arresting sequence in which she journeys on a boat down a crowded waterway, that her loneliness is not that of the machine but of post-industrial humanity itself.

As with the other two films, however*, Ghost* ends ambiguously as the cyborg apparently joins with a bodiless entity known as "The Puppet Master," a move which may liberate her, and perhaps other sentient beings, from overreliance on either the body or technology. In the final scene, the viewer sees her standing, seemingly alone but perhaps not, asking, "Where do I go from here?" Typically, the film provides no answers, only possibilities.

Ghost may be profitably compared with such American cyborg films as the extremely popular *Terminator* series. In the American films, however, the menace/promise of the machine, while initially prominently highlighted, is ultimately seen as squarely under control of the humans. Visualize this in the final section of *Terminator 2 Judgement Day* in which a young boy teaches the menacing cyborg, played by Arnold Schwarzenagger, to become a kinder, gentler form of terminator.

A work that combines *Ghost*'s philosophical reflectiveness with *Akira*'s visceral display of destruction is the extraordinary 1997 television series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shinseiki Evangelion*). In this series a group of young people are forced to synchronize with enormous robots known as Evangelions to fight a series of enigmatic invaders known as Angels. As the explicitly Christian nomenclature suggests, *Evangelion* is a work that deals with a broad variety of religious and metaphysical questions. At the same time, it also brings in existentialism and psychoanalysis to probe the complex and problematic personalities of its characters. It is impossible to summarize such a rich and complex work but for the purposes of this talk, I will note that, again, the series raises far more questions than it answers. These questions revolve largely around the theme of self and Other but, in *Evangelion's* remarkable animated universe in which science fiction and the fantastic co-mingle, the Other is not only other people but also the Evangelions (the machine) and the Angels (the metaphysical Other).

Evangelion in many ways takes up themes from both *Akira* and *Ghost in Shell*—inter-generational conflict, psychic wounding, menaces from above, cloning, transubstantiation—but in a way that is only very minimally "cool." In fact, in many ways the series plays with some of the more cliched technological and apocalyptic tropes to present an utterly unique vision of existential anguish which stays with the viewer well beyond the end of the series. This is not so much because of the power of the special effects but by the extraordinary three-dimensionality of characters who all are lost and broken individuals. If we can say that *Akira* is Tech Noir, both excoriating and celebrating the fascination with world-destroying technology, *Evangelion* is simply Tech Darkness, without a "cool" noir sensibility, in which even the characters entrusted with the machines see technology as entrapping, destructive and terrifying

By now we have seen a number of rather dark examples of *anime* dealing with apocalypse and technology, and it is perhaps worthwhile to ask if there is any room for a "happy ending" in these dark visions? I would like to end with an example of a film which, although not totally comforting in that it still refuses the American style "happy ending" form of closure, does offer a measure of spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic solace. This is the film *1997 Princess Mononoke* (*Mononkehime*) directed by perhaps the greatest of Japanese animation directors, Miyazaki Hayao. This film differs from those previously mentioned in a number of significant ways. First, it is set in medieval Japan, and its *mise en scene*—while including a proto-industrial town where guns are produced—also includes a lushly beautiful forest in which dwell the *kami* or ancient gods. The film's narrative tension revolves around a war between the human

citizens of the town and the supernatural denizens of the forest. In the penultimate scene it appears that the humans and, by implication, the darker side of technology have won out. The town's leader has cut off the head of the forest's reigning deity, and the forest itself begins to destruct before the viewers' eyes in a memorable vision of ecological apocalypse. But Miyazaki goes beyond the erotics of destruction to give us hope. A young boy and girl, the "heroes" of the film, unite to bring back the head of the deity and the forest is renewed. Even in this film, however, a darker cultural sensibility exists as one child, the "princess" of the title who is united with the creatures of the forest, insists that she can never forgive the humans for their crimes against the forest and its inhabitants. The boy insists, however, that the forest will survive, as will the town. The ending does not give us a wedding between the two, despite their obvious love for each other. Instead, the film concludes with the two agreeing to "visit" each other.

While *Princess Mononoke* was the highest grossing film of its year in Japan, in its American release it did not do very well. Many viewers found it too "confusing," since they were unable to decide who were the "good" and who were the "bad," and were disturbed by the film's ambiguous conclusion. But for viewers who are willing to tolerate a vision of a complex world in which good and evil may not be obviously divided and in which technological development brings both tragedy and progress, the film offers the chance to work through these issues at a more complex level than many live action films provide. Japanese animation may at times appear dark and depressing, offering us no escape from the apocalyptic labyrinth of modern technology, but, at its best, it gives us memorable maps to explore that labyrinth and perhaps to understand its hidden passages.

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[1] Robert Lifton, "The Image of the End of the World: A Psychohistorical View," in *Apocalypse: End or Rebirth*, eds. Friedland, Holton, Marx, and Skolnikoff. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985. p. 165.

[2] Thomas de Zenotita, "The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic," *Harpers,* vol. 304, No. 1823, April, 2002.

Eliot Deutsch and Carol Gluck will be our Keynoters at the 11th Annual Asianetwork Conference in Greenville, SC
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Photo from "Japanese Film in the Classroom" Panel

Japanese Film in the Classroom
Panel: Mark MacWilliams, Chair, Saint Lawrence University; Joseph Laker, Wheeling Jesuit College; Lee Makela, Cleveland State University

Using Feature Films in the Classroom Creatively: Sandakan No. 8 and Modern Japanese History
Joseph Laker, Wheeling Jesuit College

Teaching history through the use of feature films has become more and more popular during the past twenty-five years. Sessions devoted to film history and the interpretation of film have become more numerous at historical conferences. Historical journals have begun to offer regular reviews of both feature and documentary film, and the journal *History Today* has begun to run periodic discussions of film in its "Film in Context" series. Mark Carnes suggests that he had no difficulty getting sixty professors of history to agree to write essays for his collection *Past Imperfect*, which was published in 1995. He notes that most of the historians he spoke with love historical films, even though they are highly critical of the lack of historical accuracy.[1]

The producer/director John Sayles argues that moviegoers, film producers and directors love historical films as well. He states:

> There is a certain power that comes from history. I mean, I've heard producers say many, many times that the only way a movie is going to work is if the ad says "based on a true story." Audiences appreciate the fact that something really happened. Whether it did or didn't, they're thinking it did or knowing that it did. That gives the story a certain