Extreme Conceptions in Dystopian Japanese Animation

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Abstract: The animation industry in Japan is one of the most popular subcultural industries among young people around the world in recent years, and its influence in the world cannot be underestimated, with dystopian Japanese animation playing an important role. The paper analyzes the narrative themes and aesthetic characteristics of the dystopian Japanese animation on the basis of a classification of works in recent years from the perspective of audio-visual language, and focuses on the extreme visions of the future and their practical implications based on these works. Specifically, with the technological development and social changes that have taken place in Japan in the last decade, the animation industry in Japan boasts unique aesthetic characteristics and realistic value for it has experimented with more daring methods of creation and imagination, enabling the creators to incorporate their own thoughts on society.

Keywords: Dystopia, Japanese animation, Totalitarianism, Technological alienation, Mono no aware

1. Introduction

Dystopia originally a Greek word that literally means as "a bad place", is the opposite of utopia. Contrary to the ideal utopian society,

the dystopian society is the final form of society which is hypothetical and frighteningly miserable. Dystopia is closely related to catastrophic themes such as post-apocalyptic, cyberpunk and moral decay. Japanese animation products in the genre usually present a seemingly harmonious and ideal society where technology is highly advanced and people live a happy life of material affluence, but focusing on the dark side such as totalitarianism and the depravity of human nature.

These products can be mainly categorized into three themes from the perspective of audiovisual language. The first theme is cyberpunk, which focuses on the thoughts and doubts of human beings about their identity in the context of advanced technology, representative works are Ghost in the Shell and Akira. The second is aesthetics of violence, which expresses the author's criticism and reflection through the bloodiness and cruelty of pictures. Famous anime under the theme are Attack on Titan and Tokyo Ghoul. Apocalyptic landscape is the third theme with political satire, expressing the confusion of human beings in the post-human era through the pessimistic scenery of the end of the world, such as Neon Genesis Evangelion and From the New World.

Genesis Evangelion and From the New World.

2. Second Section

2.1. Extreme conceptions of political power: the "deconstruction" and loss of individuality brought about by totalitarianism

The discussion of totalitarianism is an important genre in dystopian Japanese animation, which usually draws on violence to express the horror of its power and therefore often involves an element of aesthetics of violent. The Origins of Totalitarianism written by Hannah Arendt says that totalitarianism differs from traditional tyranny and despotism which flout rules, and has developed its own set of laws to compel everyone to obey. It is characterised by its reliance on ideology and terror to rule. In the anime NO.6, the residents must remain loyal to the government at all times, saying the words "I am forever loyal to the city government" every day at work, and no one will question the government. If one speaks words of disobedience to the government, he will die immediately. The same is true for the Sibylla system in the anime Psycho-Pass which is used to monitor and manipulate the entire society. By monitoring every corner of society, it manipulates people's ideologies and even indoctrinates new ones, no matter it is about speech, thought, or those most trivial things in daily life. When dangers are found, individuals responsible for those dangers will be ruthlessly expelled from the society, losing his or her place in the society.

Both of them portray a society in which everyone who lives in it becomes a docile individual and, for those in power, is immediately eliminated if they break the rules. Totalitarianism is horrendous since it demands that everyone in it is unconditionally docile without the sense of suspicion, eliminating the individuality of the human being, who acts as a mere tool to mechanically fulfil the instructions given by his superiors. The individuality of the human being is obliterated and he or she simply functions as a piece of machinery of this vast society. If the appearance of substandard product threatens the functioning of the society and the existence of the the ruler's will, it will be excluded from the society.

The basic raison d'être of a totalitarian government is against a fictitious worldwide conspiracy that aims at world domination and ultimately concentrates all power in the hands of the police. Its principles are "all those who do not belong should be excluded", and "whoever is not for me is against me". The dystopian Japanese animation concentrates on the ruling principles of this totalitarian society, which embodies the invisible manipulation and potential oppression of life by political power. In the society, the idea of political freedom, equality and fraternity is only a superficial false existence, while its real connotation has actually been replaced by the tyranny and dictatorship of the rulers long ago. The people living in such a society are forever unconsciously subjected to this all-encompassing domination and manipulation, not only of the body but also of the mind and the spirit. In the anime film Expelled from Paradise-, man loses his physical body and gives everything to the database. Only by contributing to society can he be given certain rights to live in the data world, when all of man's rights to live are reclaimed by the government and become one of the government's leverages to control the individual. This extreme domination of the physical body is the expression of a dystopian society. In an anti-utopian society, totalitarian politics is penetrating everywhere, controlling all material and spiritual aspects of existence, from the body to the mind, from the brain to the soul. A striking contrast is formed between this kind of oppression and manipulation, and the powerlessness of the individual suffering from it, highlighting the horror of totalitarianism.

Aesthetics of violence refers to the exploitation of the formality of gunplay, martial arts action, killings or other violent scenes, and the promotion of the formality to a beautiful and dazzling level; in some cases, directors deliberately use violent and gory scenes or scenarios to create an exciting and unpleasant effect. Manipulating the spirit and mind in all aspects of anime is expressed in a more direct and gory way, such as parasitic wasps that corrode human body in No.6, "dominator", a gun targeted at criminals in Psycho-Pass. By portraying gory scenes like the parasitic wasps eating away the host's life, aging them rapidly, and leaving them for dead, and the human body shot or splattered with flesh and blood, this anime considerably stimulates the audience and silently convey the horror of power politics with the help of visual effect. The totalitarianism is personified through the bloody and brutal tools that play the most direct role in the maintenance of rules. The horrible ideological control and the demand for absolute obedience expose totalitarian politics, and the indifference of the people living in it is a form of self-deprecation in anime and anxiety about the degradation of politics. In such a society, human beings have lost the ability to redeem themselves, and political totalitarianism has transformed society into a seemingly beautiful city of evil, and the work embodies a fervent desire for human beings to awaken to

themselves and resist power.

2.2. The extreme conception of technology: the alienation of humanity through the misuse of technology

In Critique of Dialectical Reason, Sartre points out that there are mainly two reasons for the alienation of man: firstly, the lack of material goods; and secondly, the fact that the whole world is an absurd and disgusting existence, and that absurdity causes man to be governed by many contingencies. Sartre argues that scarcity leads to alienation which can only be overcome by eliminating scarcity, but he also argues that scarcity in human society will last forever and that alienation will therefore not be eliminated. Because of the scarcity of the environment, man uses the satisfaction of needs as a means to survive, but as needs expand, man becomes a slave to his desires, and the satisfaction becomes the end of survival.

It is the inexorable state of deprivation that drives the endless pursuit of technology in modern society. Although technology has dramatically increased productivity, it inevitably leads to a deprivation that is unevenly distributed. In the conception of dystopian anime, the aggressive pursuit of technology and fanatical belief in it makes man a slave to it, as is evident in the cyberpunk genre, which focuses on technological advancement and low standards of living. As the pioneer of Japanese cyberpunk anime, the film Akira depicts how humans, deeply transformed by the government's technology, gradually lose themselves due to their over-inflated abilities and cause a catastrophe. As Fromm says, man "is not really the master any more of the world he has built; ion the contrary, this man-made world has become his master". Over-reliance on technology, which has turned it into a new myth and superstition that transcends man, is a form of technological alienation, and the degradation is essentially the result of the alienation of human nature. In the anime film Expelled from Paradise-, humans give up their bodies and live in a data world where everything is data-driven and their contribution to society becomes the only criterion for possible survival. In the society, the value of human beings is valued by means of technology, and science and technology, represented by the world of data, have replaced traditional values and norms of life as the link between people and their interactions, and even as the basis for their existence in the new world, where technology is distorted and humanity is ultimately alienated. Technological alienation and the degradation of humanity are the constant themes of dystopian anime, in which the fears brought about by technology silently erode the bodies and souls of human beings in a seemingly beautiful ideal land without any resistance. The indifference of humans to a generally alienated world is portrayed in the anime as a reflection on the misuse of technology.

And because of the unique artistic tension of anime, the consequences of such technological distortions are often expressed in horrific and exaggerated painting forms, adding to its horror and sense of shock. As a result, while the viewer is creeped out, he or she can still unconsciously think about the negative effects of extreme technology development, magnifying the significance of the amine in reality. Whether it is the horrific scene in the anime *Akira* where one of the main characters, Tetsumo, expands uncontrollably after his body is transformed, or the gory scene in *Psycho-Pass* where a policeman carries a high-tech identification gun, "dominator", hits a person and drips himself with blood, or the cruel scene in *Futurama.06* where the "Killer bee", government's ruling tool, erodes human bodies, all leave a huge impact on the viewer's mind through the horrible and bold paintings, dragging viewers into contemplation and sending them a warning to wake them up.

In such a post-apocalyptic world, destruction and rebirth have become an eternal theme, with the idea of "mono no aware" prevailing throughout the whole story. The main character and his companions always undergo various trials and tribulations, following the destruction of the world, and then embrace two different directions of ending. This not only includes the happy-endings in the above-mentioned *Danganronpa*, the classic anime *Hokuto Shinken* in the 1980s, and *library war* where the main characters and his companions reclaim their egos after various trials and tribulations and step unto the path to the future together but also the tragic samsara in the *Evangelion* and *Psycho-Pass* where the protagonist feels deep powerlessness to change the world. Both of them undoubtedly reflect the author's expectations for human beings in the post-apocalyptic world. The former is to inspire viewers through displaying sparkles of humanity, while the latter is to depict the protagonist's powerlessness to give viewers a warning. Regardless of the types of ending, the idea of "mono no aware" is well embodied in this post-apocalyptic world, prevailing throughout the whole story.

2.3. The extreme conception of aesthetics: the complete presentation of mono no aware in the apocalypse

Japanese anime with apocalyptic complex is a classic genre of dystopian Japanese anime, the

pessimistic spectacle of the apocalyptic world is often accompanied by the confusion of the post-human era. Through typical imagery such as nuclear war, natural disasters or the rise of non-human species, it portrays the horror of the world destruction, the disintegration of human civilization, and the consequent doubt of human existence. The concept of mono no aware belongs to the category of the history of Japanese aesthetics, embodying the struggle of human beings and their hope for self-redemption in the midst of various natural and man-made disasters under the end times.

The narrative tension of the beauty of mono no aware in the apocalypse does not stem from the anxiety of 'facing the world destruction', but rather from 'showing how and why the world is destroyed and the means to overcome it'. The destruction often leads to two very different ends: one in which destruction is reduced to ashes, and one in which destruction leads to new life. Both endings convey a core expectation - that through the remaking of the world, the redemption of humanity, which has suffered countless disasters, will finally be achieved. The idea is reflected by many animation products and their plots such as the hero of Danganronpa and his team choose to continue fighting the villains after the vast majority of the world's population has been brainwashed as the doomsday comes, and "eva" mechas, the last tools to protect mankind from invading species in Neon Genesis Evangelion.

The destruction and rebirth are included in the seemingly scattered but consistent temperament in Japanese aesthetics shaped by the perilous living environment and the influence of Shinto traditions. On the one hand, they reflect an aesthetic sentimentalism that respects bleak scenes under the traditional ideas of mono no aware; on the other hand, they present an obsession with a series of scenes of decay, death and even bloody violence about destruction. Plot change is often driven by the destruction of something external, and change and destruction are synonymous, both possessing a certain apocalyptic connotation. For example, different parallel worlds are depicted in Another World with different endings. In the first world, the author portrays the misery of humanity's demise as the world ends and this is the end of the anime. In the extra chapters, the author applies the parallel world setting to give the world a new lease of life. The protagonist of the first world goes through all kinds of hardships and finally comes to the second world to have his friends again, and the story finally has a happy ending.

3. Conclusion

In addition, the idea of mono no aware embedded in apocalyptic anime is also reflected visually in the dissection of mechas and human bodies, such as numerous depictions of gory cannibalism scenes in Attack on Titan. Psychologically, the aesthetic orientation is formed since the hormones that are released when humans are under high stress, causing them to change from initially resistant behavior to positive and active behavior. The bloody scenes of cannibalism bring about great sensory stimulation and the subsequent despair and sadness that comes with empathising with the characters, in line with the pessimistic ending of being reduced to ashes in destruction, and in keeping with the traditional ideas of mono no aware that favors destruction.

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