

A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Neon Genesis Evangelion

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Psychology of Art
December 2015

Neon Genesis Evangelion is a Japanese animated TV series originally broadcast during the years 1995 and 1996. It consists of 26 episodes and various other media from which this paper is only going to focus on a movie called *The End of Evangelion*. It became immensely popular even beyond the borders of Japan and is widely considered one of the most successful anime series of the 1990s.

Its premise is that in the near future, a large portion of the humanity has died after a cataclysmic event called the “Second Impact” after which giant beings known as Angels, who are attempting to destroy the civilization, started to appear. To combat them, an organization known as NERV based in Tokyo-3 has created giant robots piloted from the inside (“mechas”) called the Evangelions or Evas, an only weapon that can stop the Angels. Their pilots throughout most of the series are Shinji Ikari (the protagonist) Asuka Soryu and Rei Ayanami, and the plot is primarily concerned with them.

While it may appear at a first glance as an ordinary run-of-the-mill anime which revolves around giant robots fighting giant aliens, the series takes a sharp turn around the sixteenth episode, in which for the first time, a large part of its content consists of an inner monologue of one of the characters. Afterwards, the series’s focus shifts increasingly towards the interpersonal relationships of the individual characters, making the grand plot about salvation of humanity from the aliens somewhat of a backdrop. This trend culminates in the last two episodes, 25 and 26, which consist only of an elaborate exposition of the characters’ psyches through monologues, abstract imagery and reused footage. It can even be said that the series is actually primarily about the (often severely dysfunctional) relationships between the characters, their personal problems and their traumatic past.

It is known that Hideaki Anno, the creator of the series, has been going through depression at the time of the creation of the series. He has even been quoted as follows: “That was my ‘true’ desire. I tried to include everything of myself in Neon Genesis Evangelion-myself, a broken man who could do nothing for four years.” (Clark, 2005) The idea of Anno’s inclusion of his own inner conflicts in the plot of the series has been corroborated by the assistive director Kazuya Tsurumaki in an interview (“A Story of Communication”, n.d.) in which he equates Shinji’s and Anno’s feelings. All this

presents a potentially substantial pathographic approach to the psychoanalytic analysis of Neon Genesis Evangelion.

Additionally, psychological profiles of the individual characters have become over the course of the series complex enough to warrant analysis on their own. The case for the protagonist is clear enough. Since the series starts by Shinji being called into Tokyo-3 by his long absent father (Gendo Ikari) for the sole reason of getting him to pilot the robot, there is a constant presence of a father-son conflict throughout the entire show, not to mention that the abandonment by his father has been a major formative factor in Shinji's personality. He is shown to be rather passive and submissive, and a large part of his inner monologue later in the show deals with his validation by others, his purpose in life, and so on. However, each of the major characters is also shown to possess a host of potential repressed desires and complexes. Asuka witnessed her mother's suicide. Misato is a motherly figure, but actually induces constant sexual tension. Gendo Ikari was shown to be not able to deal with the death of his wife.

There is therefore a number of different approaches one could take when discussing Neon Genesis Evangelion, but first, I'd like to focus on the constant undertone of uncanniness. I believe it stems from the very vague boundaries between animate and inanimate present in all sorts of places in the show, most obvious one being that the Eva units are not mechanical robots as is usual in the genre, but rather artificial biological life-forms with only a mechanical surface. The characters nor the viewer knows this at the beginning, which results in a quite uncanny moment when this is revealed: Shinji sees a the robot's helmetless head in the reflection of a building (presence of a mirror being quite symbolical, since the robot is later also shown to stand for the pilots' mothers), which then regenerates an eye and turns to look directly at him. It is also later shown that all injuries the robot sustains transfer through a neural connection onto the body of the pilot as well, weakening the barrier between robot and body even further.

In any case, the horror stemming from this very likely reaches its peak in the eighteenth episode ("Ambivalence"), in which an Eva unit is infected by an Angel, which then proceeds to take

control of the robot with the pilot still inside. The trio (Shinji, Rei, Asuka) is then sent to combat it, without knowing exactly what to expect. An immensely uncanny moment follows when they see for the first time that they're going to be battling essentially one of their own. The uncanniness in this scene, in my opinion, stems at least partly from the fact that the Evangelion used to be an "other", but through the series has become closer to being an extension of the pilot's bodies, closer to the subject than to the object. To reverse the relation and force out the repression of the otherness of the robot (more so that it still has not been - could not have been - quite assimilated) evokes the uncanniness. In any case, it results in Asuka and Rei both wavering when choosing to attack it, giving an opportunity to the Angel to quickly disable them, leaving only Shinji to fight.

He refuses because he does not want to kill a human being, even though it might result in his own death. Shinji is then remotely cut off from the controls of the robot (by his father nonetheless), which are then given to an automatic system that proceeds to violently tear apart the Angel/Eva - all while Shinji helplessly watches inside. This is one of the most intense scenes in the series, and I believe the power of it could be explained using Kristeva's concept of the "abject". There is the necessary crossing of the boundary from me (the robot-body is under my control, an extension of me) to not-me (robot is acting autonomously with me inside). There also is the abhorrent breach of rules which one finds safety in. Alternatively, this scene could also be interpreted as the moment when id (the robot's automatic system) takes precedence over ego (the pilot), or as Jung's concept of invasion. After all, there also is a constant struggle to "pilot" one's unconscious which is always just barely under our "control", but always threatens to overpower us.

Then, I'd like to discuss the movie *The End of Evangelion*. It is divided into two episodes, numbered 25' and 26' and is therefore a complement or a "replacement" for the original episodes 25 and 26. Its plot can be summed up thusly. Following the defeat of all Angels, we learn that SEELE (an organization above NERV) means to initiate Third Impact (the cataclysmic event the entire show was spent avoiding by fighting Angels) under their own command in order to bring about the Human Instrumentality Project which would unite all human souls into one, eliminating all suffering.

However, Gendo has his own plans to use NERV in order to reunite with his deceased wife. SEELE then raids the NERV headquarters using military force. It is successful, and Gendo retreats together with Rei with the intent of fusing with her in order to trigger the Third Impact. However, Rei rejects him and fuses with Lilith instead, growing into giant size. Shinji's Eva, along with him inside, is then joined via a ritual with Rei's giant body, triggering the Third Impact. This in effect places Shinji as a demi-godly figure in the in the virtual center of the cataclysm. Then, most of the movie proceeds in various phantasies in which Shinji debates the morality of such a project, undergoes a regressive experience (which is analyzed later), and finally rejects the Instrumentality Project, instead opting to return to physical reality with all its pain, suffering, but also joy and love.

From a larger-scale point of view, the structure of the movie neatly fits within Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, which is based on the Jungian concept of objective psyche. At the beginning of the movie, Shinji is told to pilot the Eva during the NERV raid ("Call to Adventure"). However, he's too depressed and ultimately doesn't enter the robot ("Refusal of the Call"). He is found by the SEELE thugs, and held at gunpoint, but at the very last moment, Misato (his "caretaker" of sorts) appears and saves him ("Supernatural Aid") and even gives him a talisman when sending him off to the place where his Eva is located. He eventually does enter the robot ("Crossing the Threshold") and heads outside, only to see Asuka's robot-body torn to pieces and half-eaten, finally making him lose his last bits of sanity. He is then lifted up and crucified by SEELE's Eva units, and enters Rei's body, initiating the cataclysm ("Belly of the Whale"). The initiation phase occurs entirely in the phantasies and is too lengthy to examine here due to the various overlapping of the functions of characters (nearly all women serve to Shinji as mother figures as well as romantic/sexual interests at various points in the story). In any case, Shinji attains the "Ultimate Boon" by realising that life is worth living even though it necessarily contains suffering. He thus rejects the Instrumentality Project, and is told that all people who want to return will be given the opportunity to return, and returns to the physical reality.

The fact that the entire process of the Third Impact is concerned with the dissolution of the barrier between humans (i.e. the ego) provides ample opportunities for interpretation. The structure of the monomyth has been applied to the structure of spiritual experiences as well (so called “ego death”), so *The End of Evangelion* could be considered in essence a representation of such. Just as the TV series is a story about human relationships - told through the narrative tools provided by the context of a mecha anime; the concluding movie might be a story about the process of perceived “ego death” - told through the context of a mecha anime. But more importantly, it seems analogous to Kris’s formulation of “regression in the service of the ego”. Shinji does indeed revert to a sort of a childish state in the process of the Third Impact because of impulses he can no longer stand. There, he meets with motherly figures (among others) and attains a new sense of security in the face of the challenges of the world, before building up his self again and returning.

On a smaller scale, the first scene I’d like to pick out and analyze is the very last scene of *The End of Evangelion*. It has been the topic of much heated discussion. After Shinji returns to reality, he finds himself lying next to Asuka (at this point more than just an object of his sexual desire), with nobody else in sight. What he does is climb on top of her (a potential visual callback to earlier scenes, where Shinji is partly fused with Rei, sitting in top of him in a similar position) and attempts to strangle her. He does so quite vigorously, which is shown in graphic detail, with Shinji’s fingers digging deep into Asuka’s throat. Despite that, as if not aware of his attacks, Asuka lifts her hand and caresses Shinji’s face. It is at this point that Shinji stops and starts crying. Asuka’s final words are “How disgusting”, after which the movie ends.

While the ending might seem very perplexing when viewed from a literal perspective, I believe it starts to clear up when considered as a metaphor within object relations theory. In order to properly establish the existence of an external object - i.e. to place the object out of the subject’s omnipotent control - an infant first needs to see the object survives its (imagined) attacks. This scene takes place after Shinji has returned from a place of quite literal omnipotence, where there is no suffering and all souls are one. It would only make sense if the attempted strangulation was an attack

aimed at establishing the presence of Asuka. Her response, which now becomes physically possible when one considers Shinji's attack as essentially illusory, is a motherly gesture - a caressing of the face, showing her continued love towards him, evidencing that she indeed survives his hatred.

Afterwards, Shinji breaks down in tears - as it's only after this realization of the separation that Shinji is able to mourn the loss.

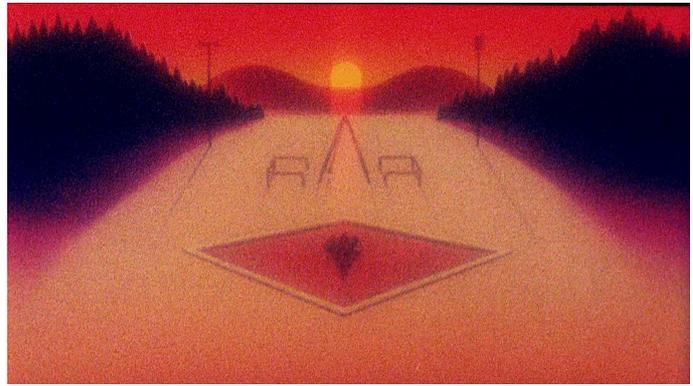
Asuka's final words are therefore uttered only after her otherness has been established. This is further evidenced by Asuka not moving her eyes, changing her facial expression or otherwise making any movement except the caress until after Shinji starts crying. They can thus safely be interpreted in the context of her own character, who must have gone through a similar experience as Shinji (as Shinji could not have willed her into existence, it was stated that only people who want to return are going to return), and has also realized her return to reality. "Disgusting" might therefore mean a disgust at being in a physical body with physical limitations once again, and being separate from others, or simply a disgust at Shinji's weaknesses.

The second scene I am going to analyze is the "Sandbox sequence". It occurs shortly after Shinji's Eva has been crucified as a part of the Third Impact and he's undergone nearly complete mental breakdown. Some shots of lesser importance will be omitted. The sequence features frequent condensation (in the sense of Freud's concept of dream-work). It starts out by a static shot of a video camera. This implies mainly two things, the artificiality of the scene, i.e., that even though it appears as a memory, it is not a true memory, and observation, or, the judgement from outside. This also calls to how eventually in episode 25 (one of the two consisting of monologues), Shinji resolves one of the great dilemmas he's facing, the idea of the definition of self through others. Shinji finds that he cannot exist without having a mirror in others, which show him the difference and in effect his boundaries.

Then, a shot of a kids' playground is shown, which requires a slight pause. There is an abundance of symbolic imagery. For one, the two hills in the background are reminiscent of breasts. If we accept this, then it follows that the breasts are viewed from the top, which does not work out spatially, or the bottom. And since we're viewing the breasts from the bottom, the sun could be

interpreted as the head of the mother (with all the warmth and giving-of-life it implies); but more significantly, the rhombus shape acquires significant vulvic symbolism.

Above the suspected vagina, we find a clear phallic symbol surrounded by a pair of smaller shapes. Then, a shot is shown from



the opposite side, towards young Shinji's face, with an incomplete pyramid occupying the bottom half of the shot. The pyramid (in accordance with condensation) is both a phallic symbol, as well as being a direct reference to the Geofront, a building where NERV is located. Shinji is then invited to build a sand castle by a children's voice off-screen, which clearly pleases him.

We're then shown a shot of Shinji enthusiastically building the castle accompanied by two dolls with exaggerated facial features, specifically the eyes and the mouth. I believe this is meant, for one, to signify the potential sexuality of Asuka and Rei who are the first that come to mind when one is to consider two peers of Shinji. They represent the voyeuristic approach, which is sexuality by looking, and then, kissing, or more generally the oral approach. And second, this is meant in broader sense to signify Shinji's feelings of exclusion, as he was abandoned by his father and constantly struggles with relationships. This is further supported by noting that a doll may paradoxically represent the absence of a childhood (Ronen, 2004).

And indeed, next shot shows us a motherly figure calling the "children", which leave Shinji alone at the sandbox. Music which has been playing until now, stops. Shinji is starting to sob, and continues building the pyramid alone. When the pyramid is finished, Shinji starts kicking it down, which is also a direct allusion to earlier episodes in which he stomps down the Geofront in his mecha during a fit of rage. Crucially though, it signifies the attack directed at the mother - or potentially the father as well, given the symbolical ambivalence. Shinji was, in a sense, abandoned by both, though for drastically different reasons. There is a shot of the phallic swing stopping. Then, after a while of

consideration, he starts rebuilding the pyramid while still sobbing. I believe this scene is meant to represent the destructive phantasies and subsequent guilt an infant feels in Klein's depressive position towards a motherly figure, especially upon separation.

Finally, it's also interesting to consider the visual side of the conclusion to *The End of Evangelion*. It's been noted that in images that people suffering from depression create in art therapy, a barren landscape is a common motif (Thorne, 2011), often in monochrome with the next colour used being red. This is suspiciously similar to the ending scenes of the movie, as it uses either very dark or very light colours, with lots of red (which is quite literally blood). Even though the control Anno had over the final artistic direction might have been limited, it is not implausible to think that in the context of an artistic production, the depressive feelings Anno harbored could have transferred over to people actually responsible for the visuals.

All this might or might not have been intentionally put in by the authors. There are several clues that they might have been acquainted with some psychoanalytical theories, as some of the episodes bear names with terms from them (e.g. "Splitting the breast", "Introjection", "Oral phase"). Also, various other terms are interspersed throughout the series in the form of in-series technical terminology (so called "technobabble"), though the meaningfulness of those allusions is questionable. Finally, hedgehog's dilemma is also explicitly mentioned as an explanation for Shinji's relationships, which on the other hand suggests a more than a casual familiarity with the concepts.

Hopefully it has been shown that Neon Genesis Evangelion presents quite a fertile ground for psychoanalysis. However, since the scope of this paper is limited, only selected passages could be presented and analysed here. Specifically those which did not require overly elaborate plot expositions, character analyses and extraneous information sources (e.g. studio-approved booklets, videogames) were picked out. Therefore, this analysis is very much incomplete, but I believe it still presents some valuable insights about the series using a psychoanalytic perspective.

References

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