

## ***No Reason to Stay in the Real World Any Longer* Anime Series and Spirituality in Post-Aum Japan**

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### **Abstract**

In 1995, the sarin gas attack by Aum Shinrikyō provoked a short circuit in Japanese society. New New Religions (*shin shinshūkyō*) became associated with sectarian violence disappearing from the public discourse, while trust in media and government plummeted. Against this background, I argue that animated series *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998, Triangle Staff), *Boogiepop Phantom* (2000, Madhouse), and *Paranoia Agent* (2004, Madhouse) helped young adults of the Lost Decade (*ushinawareta jūnen*) fulfill their longing for transcendence outside discredited religious frameworks. These series did so by means of narratives where hypertechnology (*Lain*), contact with superhuman beings (*Boogiepop Phantom*) or paranormal entities (*Paranoia Agent*) invite an existentialist redefinition of the “self” and its relationship with society. They also share a quasi-stand-alone structure, where each episode is conceived as a self-sufficient “experience” (*taiken*) addressing a different human type, thus replicating the intimacy of spiritual experiences. Finally, they all foresee some sort of apocalypse (i.e., the Wire reset in *Lain*, the pillar of light in *Boogiepop Phantom*, the black ooze in *Paranoia Agent*) whose costs outweigh the benefits. By engaging in a formal and linguistic analysis of each episode of each series, I have summarized the preliminary findings regarding how these anime are telling of the trying times they were produced in, and how they reopened the discourse on spirituality in the post-Aum scenario.

*Keywords:* anime, Aum Shinrikyō, Madhouse, new religions, science fiction

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## Introduction

### Defining “New New Religions”

Since the late 1980s, worsening political and environmental conditions in Japan had been attracting more and more people to new religious movements, especially among the working-age population (Shimazono, 1995). Often referred to as “New New Religions” (*shin shinshūkyō*) in the scholarly discourse, in order to distinguish them from comparable movements in the late Meiji, Taishō, and pre-war Shōwa periods (Anderson, 1995), they share some features that call for a separate classification.

New New Religions seek to provide their followers with spiritual reassurance where materialism and science have failed to do so, yet maintain that technological developments are necessary for the salvation of humanity. They also encourage a world-renouncing attitude in order to be fully prepared for said collective salvation, to be witnessed in the form of an Armageddon. However, as only those equipped with true faith would survive, their salvific message is found in contradiction with their apocalyptic outlook. As per how adepts can prepare themselves for this scenario, they place renewed emphasis on self-improvement through individual experiences (*taiken*), meditation, and imitation of the spiritual leader (Shimazono, 1995).

### The Post-Aum Scenario

In the beginning, the attitude of national media towards these groups was not necessarily critical. If anything, because the founders of the above-mentioned groups did not present themselves as cult leaders, but as intellectuals criticizing capitalist society. Treated mainly as a talk show sensation that could easily spark criticism or praise based on how they positioned themselves, New New Religions flooded the public discourse, catering to the curiosity of young adults genuinely interested in spirituality and alternative life paths (Metraux, 1995).

However, this was no longer the case after the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995, perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyō adepts.

From that point on, the mediatic narrative unified: broadcasting channels aired edited cuts of the promotional videos created by Aum, emphasizing its fanatic aspects; newspapers, in the attempt to differentiate from competitors, often took any leak at face value without verifying nor attributing information, and started turning rumors into factualized accounts (Hardacre, 2007/2008).

Once the story died out, any debate on or coverage of New New Religions as a social phenomenon rather than as a threat to national security—as had been the case before the attack on the Tokyo subway—became impossible. They eventually disappeared from the public discourse, together with the vocabulary and the new perspectives they had contributed to disclose.

It is precisely against this background that I argue that the anime *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998, Triangle Staff), *Boogiepop Phantom* (2000, Madhouse), and *Paranoia Agent* 2004, Madhouse) bear the sign of those trying times, and that helped reintroduce the vocabulary employed by New New Religions that appealed to the young adults of the Lost Decade (*ushinawareta jūnen*).

## Research Sample

### Serial Experiments Lain (id.)

Production: Triangle Staff, 1998, 13 episodes.

Staff: Nakamura Ryūtarō (director), Ueda Yasuyuki (producer), Konaka Chiaki (writer), Abe Yoshitoshi (character design), Tsuruoka Yōta (sound design).

Synopsis: Iwakura Lain is a quiet middle school student living in the suburbs of Tokyo. After the suicide of her classmate Chisa, whose consciousness is apparently preserved in the Wired (i.e., the Internet), Lain develops an interest in Navi systems (i.e., personal computers). There, Lain will find God, or at least something quite close to it.

### Boogiepop Phantom (*Bugīpoppu wa warawanai*)

Production: Madhouse, 2000, 12 episodes.

Staff: Watanabe Takashi (director), Maruyama Masao (producer), Murai Sadayuki (writer), Suga Shigayuki (character design), Tsuruoka Yōta (sound design).

Synopsis: A prequel to the eponymous light novel by Kadono Kōhei published in 1998, it is set in a provincial city in Japan where a mysterious pillar of light appears. As a result, some people acquire supernatural powers, while others disappear. Investigating the facts that occurred five years earlier, Boogiepop, an emissary of death, will try to restore order.

### Paranoia Agent (*Mōsō dairinin*)

Production: Madhouse, 2004, 13 episodes.

Staff: Kon Satoshi (director), Tsuruzaki Rika (producer), Minakami Seishi (writer), Andō Masashi (character design), Mima Masafumi (sound design).

Synopsis: Sagi Tsukiko, creator of the hit character Maromi, is attacked by a boy on rollerblades with a baseball bat. Shortly after, more innocent citizens are assaulted by the same boy, whom the media tentatively name “*shōnen batto*” (“Lil’ Slugger’ in the English version). Tokyo police investigate, trying to find a connection between the cases.

## Literature Review

### Anime and the Post-Aum Scenario

Only limited academic literature by Western scholars has devoted attention to the three animated series that make up the research sample. In addition, a link between these series and the new mass religious movements in Japan in the chosen timeframe has never been established.

### Scholarship on *Serial Experiments Lain*

Addressing the problem of existence in contemporary Japanese animation, Napier (2005) devotes some remarks to how *Serial Experiments Lain* makes viewers question whether the

erasure from the material world undergone by the protagonist can be read as downgrading, inasmuch as the cyberspace seems to be a much more rewarding alternative to physical reality.

Interestingly, in her concluding thoughts, Napier interprets *Serial Experiments Lain*'s cyberpunk allure, embodied by the cyberspace, as one of those “other worlds” (p. 78) that, encompassing the spiritual and the supernatural, invite a redefinition of what reality and individuality stand for.

Along this line of reasoning, the study by Jackson (2012) further develops the concept by employing the theoretical tools of Cartesian geometry, reading Lain's ambiguous *locus* of identity as a spatial corollary to the equally Cartesian maxim “*cogito ergo sum*.” According to this analysis, *Serial Experiments Lain*'s worldbuilding—conjoining the “real” and the “virtual” space—rests on an objection to the traditional Cartesian model, in that it assumes a universe not coverable by a single, unambiguous Cartesian system.

Counterintuitively, while the univocity of the “self” has long been believed to represent a fixed point within the increasingly fragmented, multinodal space we inhabit today—eerily similar to the one Lain inhabits—it appears that *Serial Experiments Lain* confutes such univocity.

As the “self” does not substantiate the world around us, but is rather shaped by it in its unfolding, it can be concluded that inhabiting a world with blurred and shifting boundaries equals to an uncertain, ever-redefining self-identity. The founding principle of reality thus must lie somewhere else, and spirituality becomes a viable epistemological alternative.

### **Scholarship on *Boogiepop Phantom***

Surprisingly little has been written about *Boogiepop Phantom*. Publications tracking the developments of anime subculture at large briefly mention it for the sake of completeness (Daza-Orozco et al., 2018).

In fact, the essay by Grela (2011) is perhaps the only publication devoting enough space to discuss it in depth. Defined as a “progressive anime” (p. 126) with authorial ambitions, *Boogiepop Phantom* is first analyzed as a part of the wider multimedia franchise initiated by the eponymous light novel by Kadono Kōhei, whose context allows one to fully enjoy the series. As a stand-alone product, its narrative device, continuously switching between the present, the recent past (i.e., a few months earlier) and the remote past (i.e., five years earlier), is observed to function as a stream of consciousness. Finally, again as a stand-alone product, its representation of the female body is said to stand in contrast with industry standards of the time, as it does not comply with the logic of fanservice.

However insightful, Grela's analysis does not frame *Boogiepop Phantom* within the social and historical context of Japan at the time when the anime was produced, thus overlooking any possible link with spirituality and religious mass movements.

### **Scholarship on *Paranoia Agent***

Given Kon Satoshi's popularity as one of the directors that most contributed to changing Western audiences' perception of anime as an artistic medium, *Paranoia Agent* is featured in monographic studies covering Kon's body of work.

Yet, perhaps precisely because of Kon's reputation, the series has often been overlooked compared to his full-length animated features.

Among the publications that dedicate particular attention to *Paranoia Agent*, the study by Figal (2010) approaches it as a metaphor of the relationship between mass media and viewers-as-consumers, by which everybody is turned into an "*otaku manqué*—obsessive 'fans' of media products without the attendant specialized knowledge of them or active engagement in them" (p. 140). Not without a certain self-irony, the series points out how anime themselves—*Paranoia Agent* included—have proven complicit in dulling the senses of the masses. Therefore, if one were to find an answer to the question "Who is the monster?", which detectives Ikari Keiichi and Maniwa Mitsuhiro also grapple with in the 13 episodes of the series, there would be no need to search that far.

While not disregarding the soundness of this first level of reading, detecting Kon's criticism of late capitalism, it should be pointed out how such a relationship between media and audience is based on what Japanese citizens experienced first-hand in the immediate aftermath of the Aum terrorist attacks.

At that point in time, the ready-made consumer good that mainstream media were feeding to the masses—in the same fashion as the terrifying Lil' Slugger portrayed by the news in *Paranoia Agent*—was the horrific, heavily manipulated updates on Asahara's sect, and on any other sect that was believed to harbor comparable ambitions. Figal also does not fail to notice how the black ooze engulfing the citizens of Tokyo in the final episode equals an apocalypse, brought about by the triumph of consumer culture, and whose possibility for palingenesis is denied in the closing sequences. After a two-year reconstruction plan, reminiscent of Japan's postwar rebuild, the citizens of Tokyo are back to their routine, squished in commuter trains, and surrounded by products they do not really want.

### Methodology

By means of a formal analysis, according to the methodology established in film studies by Thompson (1988), combined with a linguistic analysis, according to the methodology established in content analysis by Krippendorff (2018), I have addressed the following research questions:

- How are the anime series *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998), *Boogiepop Phantom* (2000) and *Paranoia Agent* (2004) telling of the trying times they were produced in?
- How did the above-mentioned anime series help reopen the discourse on spirituality in the post-Aum scenario?

By systematically rewatching all the episodes of each series, I noted down and categorized any instance that, on a technical, narrative, or lexical level, could be telling of the specific period in which these anime were produced, and/or pertaining to the religious discourse before this was discontinued by mainstream media due to the Aum shock.

Due to length and formatting reasons, the original tables (one per each series) have not been recreated below. In the Results and Discussion section, I will elaborate directly on the significance of the recurring patterns observed on a technical, narrative, or lexical level. However, in order to provide an indication of how I have systematized the observed instances, the original template has been recreated below.

**Table 1***Template: Dimensions for Formal and Linguistic Analysis*

| Series Title JP/EN<br>(Studio, Year) |             | Existential<br>Redefinition<br>of the “Self” | Human<br>Type<br>Represented      | Social Issue<br>Addressed              | Apocalypse<br>Represented?<br>(Y/N) |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Ep. No.                              | Ep. Title   |                                              |                                   |                                        |                                     |
| Ep. 00                               | Title JP/EN | Quote with<br>timestamp<br>JP/EN             | Age group,<br>occupation,<br>etc. | Bullying/Self-<br>segregation,<br>etc. | Y/N                                 |

## Results and Discussion

### Recurring Patterns: Technical Level

All three series present urban settings, whose infrastructures (e.g., train tracks, factories) and machines (e.g., utility poles, security cameras) appear far more detailed than their landmarks and inhabitants.

They also rely on a complementary color palette, where the vivid colors of neon lights and street illumination—usually associated with the representational tropes of Tokyo in mainstream animation—are absent. The color gamut is that of healthcare facilities (i.e., light blue, grey), but when illusion takes over reality—provided that the boundary between the two can be ascertained—it shifts to the other end of the spectrum (i.e., bright yellow, orange).

Sound design is invariably invasive, creating a sense of disorientation as city sounds (e.g., station jingles, electrical hums, ringtones, traffic) can be heard even when their source is not supposed to be there, or when it is impossible to determine the location of the source as the latter is supposedly off-screen.

Consistently with sound design, editing purposely defies continuity: an eyeline match is often not followed by the object being looked at by the subject framed by the camera. Match-on-action continuity is also missing, as an axial cut may follow.

### Recurring Patterns: Narrative Level

Even though the synopses provided do not allow us to appreciate the overlaps between the plots, it suffices to say that all three series open with a teenager or young adult having to deal with a violent crime, and conclude with some sort of apocalypse.

While maintaining a substantially stand-alone structure, episodes' primary focus is often teenagers or young adults who struggle to “fit in.” This applies especially to the countless secondary characters, among which recurring archetypes can be observed (i.e., each series has a dedicated episode for the *otaku*, the failing student, the unpopular high school girl, etc.).

The social issues portrayed (i.e., suicidal tendencies, drug abuse, desensitization to violence, lack of interpersonal relations) are those associated by mainstream media with the demographics of students and working adults, which also represent the age groups that underwent mediatic bashing for their supposedly “unhealthy” interest in religion in the

immediate aftermath of the Aum attacks. This also explains why all three series align in providing a negative portrayal of journalists and law enforcement.

As a result, inasmuch as each episode is dedicated to a specific human type, characters—whether main or minor—are not directly tied to each other despite playing a role in the same horizontal plotline. They might pass by each other without knowing that they have a part in the same scheme, thus reinforcing the self-contained dimension of each episode (i.e., vertical plot-oriented storytelling).

### **Recurring Patterns: Lexical Level**

Throughout all three series, special emphasis is placed on the contrast between “people” (*ningen*, which is biologically marked compared to the more common *hito*) and “society” (*shakai*), “reality” (*genjitsu*; *riaru*) and “illusion” (*mōsō*; *bācharu*), “memories” (*kioku*; *ishiki*, in the sense of “memory” as the act of “becoming aware”) and “lies” (*uso*; *nisemono*).

Specialized lexicon pertaining to the narrative of humanity’s quasi-extinction and the cultivation of individual abilities, encompassing vocabulary such as “prophecy” (*yogen*; *otsuge*), “salvation” (*sukui*; *kyūsai*), “evolution” (*shinka*; *saishū keitai*), “supernatural powers” (*fushigina chikara*) and “superior knowledge” (*kōdona chisei*), used by New New Religions to support their proselytism activities in the observed time frame, is pervasive.

When “higher powers” are mentioned, they are explicitly labeled as “heretical groups” (*jakyō shūdan*) or “secret societies” (*himitsu kessha*): the same labels used by the Japanese media to describe religious mass movements in general after the Aum attack on Tokyo subway.

Finally, there is an overwhelming recurrence of internal state predicates: how characters feel is often the main subject of conversation (e.g., the passive use of the verb *oitsumeru*, “to corner,” in *Paranoia Agent*). This points towards the soul-searching attitude purported by New New Religions, which used to encourage adepts to liberate themselves also at an emotional level.

### **Conclusions**

As per the first research question, despite never mentioning any real event or organization, the sampled animated series describe a situation where Japanese society is shaken by violent events whose scale is unprecedented, and whose causes are unclear.

In this context, law enforcement appears unable to protect citizens, and the media prove unable to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon, eventually conveying polarizing news. Amidst collective unrest, Japanese society is portrayed as atomized: familial bonds and friendships seem to hold no value. In isolation, people rather form connections with complete strangers.

Overall, we can interpret the above as a historically accurate rendering of Japan in the aftermath of the Aum terrorist attacks, with particular reference to the younger generation, whose interest in spirituality had been stigmatized by the media.

As per the second research question, the sampled animated series resumed questioning the meaning of “self,” “society,” and “purpose,” resorting to a vocabulary that had long disappeared from the public discourse. In doing so, however, they did not subscribe to any pre-

existing narrative: neither the messianic one of religious leaders, nor the derogatory one of mainstream media.

Plotwise, these series seem to suggest that events are governed by forces beyond the reach of the average person. However, they also share an outspoken statement urging the target audience to take accountability for their actions—or lack thereof—and accept reality: that is how any improvement process begins. On the contrary, escapism or blaming others will be of no avail.

On a darker note, they also appear to entertain the idea that societal collapse may not be inevitable, and that an Armageddon may eventually be upon us. Yet, that is not presented as something desirable, not even in a religious perspective.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The research herein presented is still at its embryonic stage. Reporting all the relevant instances detected and proceeding on an episode-by-episode basis, with the aid of the analysis of individual sequences, would have definitely contributed to reinforcing its claims. However, constraints of length have consistently limited this possibility.

As a further development, I intend to engage in thorough archival research in order to compare promotional material (e.g., print, video) developed by the New New Religions in the chosen timeframe before and after the heinous crimes of Aum, and to do the same with print and audiovisual material spread by mainstream media (e.g., major newspapers, TV broadcasters) on New New Religions before and after the same watershed event.

Finally, I intend to investigate how *Serial Experiments Lain*, *Boogiepop Phantom*, and *Paranoia Agent*, precisely because of their relegitimizing role towards spirituality and the other themes felt as most pressing by the Japanese youth, contributed to establishing a new standard for later science fiction anime series targeting the same demographics.



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