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Abstract

The anime series Neon Genesis Evangelion and the subsequent films Death & Rebirth and End of Evangelion occupy an important place in Japanese art history. Previously examined from a primarily Western perspective, this study situates Neon Genesis Evangelion in a Japanese context, focusing on Japanese art, philosophy, and religion. A major focus of this study is the Buddhist influence on this anime and the manner in which this Buddhist worldview manifests in the television series and films. My study critiques the current Western scholarship on Neon Genesis Evangelion and resituates this anime in a Japanese art historical context. This investigation places Neon Genesis Evangelion in its appropriate cultural context and, thus, presents an innovative analysis of the anime from a Buddhist perspective.
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Vita

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Chapter 1: Introduction.

*Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Shinseki ebangerion, 新世紀 エヴァンゲリオン) is an *anime*\(^1\) series that ran on Japanese television from 1995 - 1996\(^2\) and was concluded by two feature films released in 1997. The two films were titled *Death & Rebirth* and *End of Evangelion* (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Directed by Hideaki Anno,\(^3\) *Neon Genesis Evangelion* or *EVA*\(^4\) is, essentially, a science-fiction, action *anime* that deals with a variety of themes ranging from interpersonal relationships, psychological issues, religion, and the destruction/salvation of humankind. Although these complex topics have been examined by others, I suggest that these analyses have failed to capture the overarching significance of this *anime*. This paper proposes that the major metaphysical concern of EVA is a Buddhist worldview, shown through images and narrative elements.

EVA falls into a specific genre of *anime* that is often referred to as ‘mecha’ *anime*.\(^5\) Mecha refers to the mechanical elements within the films of this genre, which are often giant robots piloted by humans. Most mecha *anime* is targeted at adolescent

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3. In this text Japanese names will be inverted from their Japanese order. Thus, to conform to English practices, family names will follow given names – including character names.
4. Hereafter, the series title will often be referred to by the shortened version, EVA, derived from the nickname given to the giant robots in the series’ narrative.
boys and often includes extended, grand, and violent battle scenes between giant robots operated by opposing groups. One of the many characteristics of EVA that separates it from other mecha anime is that the opponents are not other humans piloting large robots but are a type of alien. This distinguishing feature will be explained in detail in Chapter 2.

Much of the importance of Neon Genesis Evangelion lies in its influence inside both anime and the mecha genre. EVA’s significance further arises from the cult following that it has garnered since its release, as well as from the critical acclaim that it has earned both in Japan and abroad.\(^6\) This praise is due to one of the other features that sets EVA apart from its genre: its self-reflexive and philosophical narrative. Often anime are perceived as shallow children's films punctuated by the occasional adult-themed anime, centered around violence or sex. One of the many elements of Neon Genesis Evangelion that sets it apart is that it is aimed at children and teens while dealing with sophisticated themes in a manner that is subtle and inoffensive. These complex themes are much more present in the films than in the television series, perhaps due to the nature of television censors.\(^7\)

On the surface, EVA appears to be like many other anime. Yet EVA is intrinsically different not just due to its handling of potentially controversial subject matter but because the films are self-reflexive of the genre itself. There are many moments in EVA when the imagery comments directly on the medium of anime and the artistic qualities thereof. For example, there are many scenes in both the television series and the films that break down the parts of the anime into the most basic elements of

\(^6\) Cavallaro (2009), 59-60.
\(^7\) Napier (2005), 268.
drawing and sketching. Not surprisingly, this profoundly deep and enigmatic narrative has incited much debate about the meaning of the television series and the subsequent films. This well-crafted, beautifully executed, and fascinating anime series therefore deserves the focus that it has already garnered among scholars. In addition, the richness of material makes this anime a fitting topic for the present and future studies.

Current Scholarship

Outside of Japan anime is a relatively new area of study in academia; however, there are a number of scholars who focus on anime, often from the perspectives of film or literary studies. Many of these scholars examine anime from a strictly non-Japanese perspective, focusing on interpretations based on psychology, psychoanalysis, Western philosophy, and Western religions. Even the translated Japanese sources that are used for this investigation lean heavily on the above interpretations. While these topics are relevant to many anime, when compared with the entire series and films of EVA these approaches are limited and misleading. This study is specifically a critique of Western-based scholarship, which has, as I suggest, misunderstood the fundamental concepts underlying EVA.

Much of the literature on EVA is based in film review and criticism. However, there are a number of scholars who examine anime in a theoretical, analytical manner. Those scholars I plan to critique focus on the Western imagery and the psychological elements in EVA. The most prolific scholar on EVA is Susan J. Napier who, in her books
and articles on anime, examines EVA from a Western perspective. Similarly, Mariana Ortega, in her article discussing EVA, focuses on the Judeo-Christian and psychological interpretations of the anime. In addition, a very ambitious thesis written by Lauren Gardner will be examined as she approaches EVA in a similar manner to Napier and Ortega. Alongside these scholars, I will also discuss the more balanced analysis done by Dani Cavallaro in her two books, Anime Intersections and The Art of Studio Gainax. These books along with various articles by a number of scholars reviewing EVA balance the current scholarship.

Currently, the extant scholarship on Neon Genesis Evangelion falls into what I classify as three main areas of focus: psychological, apocalyptical, and religious interpretations. There are other areas of analysis as well, some of which will be discussed along with the above three in Chapter 3. I suggest that these methods of inquiry pull EVA out of its original context. By removing EVA from its Japanese context, many of the important cultural elements are overlooked. Most important of these are what I suggest are the Buddhist themes. Also reinforcing the Japanese nature of EVA, my study situates the visual imagery within the historical developments of Japanese art. This paper thus proposes to situate EVA in a Japanese context to understand it more fully and in order to compare it to other anime, a specifically Japanese phenomenon.

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9 See “My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me: Self, Desire, Engendering, and the Mother in Neon Genesis Evangelion” (2007).
**Expected Contribution and Methodology**

In this paper I examine the final chapters of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, which appeared in the two movies *Death & Rebirth* and *The End of Evangelion* with support from analysis of the television series. I use both buddhalogically based and art historical perspectives. The buddhalogical portion of this investigation dictates that many of my sources deal with Buddhist philosophy and art. A discussion of Buddhist imagery in this ground-breaking anime series is long overdue and can contribute to the understanding of Japanese animation as a whole. It is my opinion that such pervasive Buddhist imagery (even though represented in anime) deserves its place in the chronology and history of Buddhist art in Japan. To disregard the Buddhist and other culturally relevant features of this series is to incorrectly negate thousands of years of Japanese philosophy, heritage, and culture. Further, while I do discount the existing Western scholarship entirely, I propose to rebalance the interpretations by incorporating a thorough examination of the Japanese elements within the *anime*. A second contribution of this study is the visual analysis of EVA, in which I contextualize the imagery within the framework of Japanese painting and prints. Allusions to and the legacy of Japanese yamato-e and ukiyo-e, I suggest, are clearly visible in the visual style of EVA.

In order to understand the visual elements of EVA as fully as possible, the series will be examined for support of the culminating events in the final chapters, the feature-length films. The series and films used for this project are the American releases on DVD. The research for this paper was done using the subtitled versions and not the English dubbed version and, therefore, all citations of dialogue come from these subtitles.
This study, then, expects to analyze and critique Western scholarship on EVA recalibrate such analysis with a Buddhist and Japanese contextualization.

**Plot of the series.**

Although this study focuses primarily on the two films, they do not and cannot stand alone without the extensive plot information provided by the series. *Death & Rebirth* and *The End of Evangelion* were released the same year, 1997, and in this order. Many writers have suggested that these films provide alternative endings to the series, as re-edits of the final episodes are included in the films.\(^{11}\) However, in my view the final installments appear to be an elaboration on the events depicted in the end of the series proper rather than alternative endings. The background established in the television series is essential to understanding the conclusion in the films and is crucial to the plot of the films.

The narrative of EVA is complex, twisted, and multivalent and does not become clear to the audience after a single viewing. The viewer has to assemble the narrative piecemeal, and Dani Cavallaro has done a wonderful job of presenting a timeline of the series in her book *The Art of Studio Gainax*, without which this summary would not have been possible.\(^{12}\)

*Neon Genesis Evangelion* is centered around the main character, Shinji Ikari (Figure 1.3), the fourteen-year-old son of Commander Gendou Ikari. Shinji’s mother, Yui Ikari, plays a significant role in the series; however, it is explained early on that she died

\(^{11}\) Cavallaro (2007), 55.
\(^{12}\) Cavallaro (2009), 62-66. Cavallaro begins her timeline with the earliest information provided by the narrative (4 billion years ago) and follows it through to the time of the plot, 2015. As one can see that is a lot of information to condense from a 26 episode series.
when Shinji was only three. At the beginning of the series, set in 2015 C.E., Shinji is introduced to his new occupation as a pilot of a giant robot, Eva (short for Evangelion) Unit 01 (Figure 1.4). At this point, the narrative is quite vague about the purpose of these robots; however, it is soon explained that Shinji, along with two other teenaged pilots, is expected to fight the so-called Angels, a type of alien enemy. The term shito is used in EVA to refer to these aliens and can be translated as “messenger.” For the English version of the series this term has been translated as “Angel.”\(^\text{13}\) For the sake of clarity, I will continue to refer to these characters as Angels to be cohesive with the language of the series and the language used by EVA scholars. As revealed later in the series, the onslaught of Angels is the result of a catastrophic event that occurred in Antarctica in the year 2000. This event, caused by humankind, centered around an entity called Adam (Figure 1.5) who is related to the Angels and, when exposed to them, caused an explosion that melted icecaps, killed millions, and devastated the earth’s ecosystems. This occurrence is referred to as the Second Impact.

Fifteen years later, the world’s remaining governments are attempting to fight off the Angels to prevent a Third Impact, which would occur if the Angels reach a captive creature called Lilith. Lilith is similar to Adam in genetic makeup and is stored below the surface of the newest Tokyo, Tokyo 3. When Shinji arrives in Tokyo 3, these historical events are only vague rumors to him and he is unsure what he has been summoned to do. He is introduced to Misato Katsuragi (Figure 1.6), a woman working for the military group called NERV, which built the three original Eva units and leads the fight against

\(^{13}\) Napier (2005), 97.
the Angels from Tokyo 3. Shinji’s father has arranged for Shinji to live with Misato, despite the fact that his father lives in Tokyo 3 as well. Shinji also meets the other pilots, referred to as Children of the Eva units. First Child, Rei Ayanami, is a cool and distant blue-haired girl who pilots Eva Unit 00 and plays a central role in the outcome of the plot (Figure 1.7, left). Second Child, Asuka Langley Sohryu, is a bratty, obnoxious German girl who pilots Eva Unit 02, the first production model (see Figure 1.7, right). These four characters form a tightly knit group that helps define, and sometimes cause, Shinji’s various neuroses and identity crises. There are many other secondary characters who have important roles in the story and who will be introduced as needed for the exposition of the plot.

In many ways, the title of the series helps to explain the plot. Shinseki ebangerion, (新世紀 エヴァンゲリオン) can be directly translated as “new century gospel”. In keeping with this meaning, the American release of the series used a close approximation of the title in Greek (Neon Genesis Evangelion) to make a more uniform title, as “evangelion” is a Greek word borrowed for the series’ original Japanese title. As suggested by the title, the narrative attempts to offer a new origin myth for humankind as well as a new possible ending. Although it is confusing and quite subtle, there is evidence of a First Impact which, as Cavallaro describes, occurred 4 billion years ago, and caused the appearance of Adam and Lilith.¹⁴ The significance of the Judeo-Christian names and symbols will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. It is later revealed that humans are the offspring of this event as well and are deeply connected to Adam, Lilith, and the

¹⁴ Cavallaro (2009), 62.
Angels. However, this connection is deemphasized in the contemporary world of the story. The government organizations NERV and SEELE attempt to keep the Angels, of which there are seventeen, from entering NERV headquarters (referred to as Central Dogma) and reaching the captive Lilith stored underneath in Terminal Dogma. Both organizations are trying to prevent the Third Impact and, thus, the remainder of humanity.

Almost every episode involves an attack by an Angel and its defeat with one or more of the Eva units. Although the Eva units function as giant robots piloted by the Children, there is much more to these mechanical characters than suggested by this fact. Unlike other robots in this genre of anime, their armored casing does not simply house wires and circuits but serves to bind the living creature created by SEELE so that it may do the pilot’s bidding.\(^{15}\) This is achieved through synchronization between the ego, or psyche, of the pilot and the soul of the Eva unit. The details of how the Eva units have souls and how they are contained and manipulated are vague at best.\(^ {16}\) However, by the end of the series and films it is clear that the Eva units are genetically engineered beings made by combining human and Angel DNA. The most likely explanation for the pilots’ abilities to control their Eva units lies in an understanding of an important facet of the metaphysics of the series. Many references are made to a concept called the AT Field. This force is translated as an Absolute Terror Field (AT Field) and is defined as the “wall that encloses one’s mind”\(^ {17}\) and every being in Neon Genesis Evangelion possesses one.


\(^{16}\) It is confirmed in Death & Rebirth that the Eva units do have souls, just not how the control of them is achieved.

\(^{17}\) Death & Rebirth.
The Eva units and pilots use this field when fighting the Angels and, even though it is never stated implicitly, it appears that this field also allows the synchronization between pilot and Eva unit. In the films, the AT Fields play a monumental role in the final outcome of the plot and it is then that it is learned that the AT Field not only confines the mind, or individual ego, but the physical forms of beings as well. As I will discuss later, this separation of individuals is a characteristic that I interpret as foundational to Buddhism.

Throughout the entire series, the audience and many of the characters are allowed to believe that the SEELE organization is striving, alongside NERV and the UN, to stop the Angel attacks on Tokyo 3. However, as revealed in the films, this is not the case and, in fact, the Eva units were created from the outset to bring about a catastrophic event that could be considered the Third Impact. SEELE refers to this Third Impact as the “Human Instrumentality Project” (H.I. Project from here forward). It is also revealed in the films that the Second Impact was a failed attempt at the H.I. Project fifteen years earlier. The H.I. Project is a complex and convoluted experiment that warrants a very detailed examination later in this paper. For now, the best definition of the H.I. Project comes from the character Misato’s explanatory monologue within the first five minutes of The End of Evangelion: “So, mankind, a race of flawed and incomplete separate entities, has reached the end of its evolutionary potential. The Instrumentality Project will manufacture the evolution of man’s separate entities into a single consummate being.”

Though this explanation is not entirely sufficient and the final product steers away from evolution, the basic idea is the same – SEELE plans to erase the separate AT Fields of all humanity and, thus, eliminate individual bodies and egos. I propose, and will later argue, that the elimination of individual egos is an aspect of the Buddhist worldview that permeates EVA’s narrative. The elements of this Buddhist worldview, along with the exposition of the plot of the two films, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.
Chapter 2: Stylistic Analysis.

Little scholarship has been done on the stylistic heritage and development of anime. In order to situate Neon Genesis Evangelion appropriately in its Japanese cultural context its stylistic lineage must be examined. The art form of anime is an amalgam of many traditional Japanese elements. The most obvious historical roots of anime are found in the Edo period (1603 – 1868 C.E.), including the art of Hokusai, but the stylistic qualities can be traced back to even earlier eras. The *yamato-e* of the Heian Period (794 – 1185 C.E.) as well as the Buddhist art beginning in the Nara Period (710 – 794 C.E.) continue to influence anime. To understand the stylistic qualities of Japan’s animated films one must examine the development of anime from its beginnings in the Edo period. Many of the stylistic elements used by Hokusai, specifically, have been translated to the films we watch today. years after Hokusai redefined the use of the term *manga*. The term *manga* was used by Hokusai to refer to his sketchbooks filled with cartoon-like drawings of people and animals (Figure 2.1). These books focus on mundane actions associated with everyday people. Many of them seem to be studies for later prints but almost just as many have no apparent purpose beyond the sketches. Some of the images are comical, while others depict life in its gritty, Edo Period attempt at realism.
The term *manga*, or “sketch,” was adopted by 20th century Japanese to refer to what Americans would call comic books. These Japanese comic books include superhero storylines, and, as one might expect in the United States, young boys are a major audience. The variety of *manga* is not limited to this genre, however, and other major categories are fantasy, historical fiction, and romance. A natural progression of *manga* as a popular culture, mass media phenomenon in the mid-20th century has led to the animation of these comic books. In addition, *anime* is not limited to adaptation from *manga* and many *anime* are entirely original creations.

*Anime* first became widely popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Japan had been animating motion pictures as early as Walt Disney had in the U.S. (the 1930s), the popularization of *anime* began in earnest after World War II. By the 1960s one of the most popular *manga* of all time was animated and led to a style that remained a visual part of *anime* for the next forty years; this *manga* was *Astro Boy* (Japanese: *Tetsuwan Atomu*, Figure 2.2). *Astro Boy*’s creator and director, Osamu Tezuka is considered one of the founders of modern *anime* style and his style is still copied to this day, even if the *anime* is not based directly on one of his *manga*. *Astro Boy*’s style is the “classic” style associated with *anime* and is identified by the large eyes of the characters and the disproportionally large heads compared with the tubular, flat bodies. The thick outlines and jerky movements have become somewhat expected in *anime* since these

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20 During the Edo period satirical and comical printed books, *kibyōshi*, were popular and serve as a precursor to the modern *manga*. Adam L. Kern *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the kibyōshi of Edo Japan*. (Cambridge: Havard University Asia Center. 2006), 11.
early works and it was not until the mid-1990s that anime became more fluid and “realistic.”

Tezuka relied heavily on Japanese subjects and stylistic influences even in his manga series. One important series by Tezuka is Buddha (1988), in which the life events of the Buddha Sakyamuni are depicted pre- and post-enlightenment (Figure 2.3). This manga relies on a style similar to Hokusai’s and also emphasizes Japanese elements in a peculiar fashion. Although Buddha is set in India and depicts the historical Buddha, the character himself looks like a Tezuka version of a Japanese Buddhist sculpture. Tezuka’s Buddha has the iconography of a Buddhist sculpture, including the snail-shell hair curls, usnisa, urna, and distended earlobes. These elements are depicted in rigid, bold outline and make the Buddha appear stoic and sculptural. The Buddha of this manga bears a striking resemblance to the Amida Buddhas so popular during the late Heian and Kamakura Periods (Figure 2.4). In this way Tezuka has depicted Sakyamuni as a Japanese sculptural archetype and not as a naturalistic portrait of an historical figure.

The style of most contemporary anime can be traced back to Osamu Tezuka; however, the stylistic qualities of this earlier anime go back much further than the 20th century. With Tezuka as a starting point, it is easy to examine anime in relation to Edo Period woodblock prints and the style Hokusai used in his manga. Earlier than Edo, however, is the yamato-e of the Heian Period. This painting style reveals much valuable information about the style of modern anime through its stylistic trends and innovations.

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22 Realism is not the standard in anime even today; however, some anime do use realism as a stylistic element.
The *yamato-e* stems from a rejection of the prevalent Chinese influence in Japanese painting at this time.23 One excellent example of this style of painting is found in the Phoenix Hall on the walls surrounding the statue of Amida Butsu. The four walls are painted with landscapes (Figure 2.5), with many of the vignettes featuring animals native to Japan and replicas of Amida rushing to earth. These *yamato-e* landscapes are beautifully rendered in greens and browns and, compared with the monochrome ink painting Chinese landscapes of the period, represent a “more Japanese” painting style.24 The shading is conveyed through the application of flat fields of color and a stacking of hills and trees imply distance in the overall landscape. European single-point perspective is not used in these paintings and, without such depth, they appear flat and lacking in dimension.

This style of painting begins a trend in Japanese painting style that lasts until the modern period. Such flatness appears in the prints of the *ukiyo-e* in the 19th century and to this day this type of flat rendering is present in *anime*. Indeed such flatness is considered a distinctly Japanese trait within modern animation styles. Modern *anime*, then, is rooted in Osamu Tezuka’s style, but also relies heavily on the *yamato-e* and *ukiyo-e* flatness. This is not to imply that there is little or no detail, however. The flatness of the *yamato-e* landscapes does not render them void of visual information, just as the background scenery of many *anime* is rich in visual cues of the landscapes in which the stories are set. In many cases, the background of the *anime* may be more detailed and more exquisitely

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24 Noma, 139.
rendered than the characters as, often, backgrounds are not animated and may only have to be drawn and painted once or twice (as is the case in traditional cell animation).²⁵

The elaborate *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints of the Edo Period add to this flat aesthetic. The woodblock prints of the Edo period, especially those of the *ukiyo-e*, venture into an area of more depth than that of the *yamato-e*; however, even after Western perspective is imported during the later Edo and early Meiji Periods, the figures and objects are still rendered in flat patches of color. One example of the Edo Period use of depth is the print “Fifty-three stations on the Tokaido: Lake by Hakone” by Utagawa Hiroshige (Figure 2.6). In this print, the majority of the mountains are defined individually as flat fields of color. Only a small portion of these color fields show graduation or shading. Depth in this image is primarily conveyed through diminishing size and variation in value. In less three dimensional prints, such as “Young geisha reads a *kibyōshi*” by Kitagawa Utamaro (Figure 2.7), the flat use of color fields is also apparent. This print is elaborate and greatly detailed but flat color is applied with no shading whatsoever. As is typical of these Edo Period prints, the subject is defined through outline and texture, not shading. The book, or *kibyōshi*, that the geisha holds is the best example of this lack of shading. There is only one value of yellow with no shadows underneath the book. Although Western linear perspective was introduced to Japan during the Meiji Restoration, shading still did not commonly occur. The “Theater Scene” woodblock print by Torii Kiyotada (Figure 2.8) utilizes European one-point perspective but the artist does not adjust the value of the colors. The flat fields of color

²⁵ Richie, 254.
are smaller here than in many earlier prints, supplying more detail but still do not suggest shading. However, in this print the reliance on heavy outlines has diminished and the lines are finer and less conspicuous. The flat manner of depicting shading developed during the Edo woodblock printing and prefigures the modern anime in many ways. This stylistic feature in anime is a direct result of the techniques and methods associated with woodblock printing. Even Osamu Tezuka relied heavily on the thick outlines and blocky colors that are associated with block prints. After Tezuka, anime retained the heavy, black outlines and flat color.

Not all anime fits so neatly into the stylistic grouping described above, however. Some anime artists and directors make their stylistic roots much more obvious. For example, anime such as Kai Doh Maru (Figure 2.9) and The Tale of Genji (Figure 2.10) take their visual inspiration from early Japanese scroll painting. Both of these anime are rendered in a style that refers back to the images from the Tale of Genji emaki (scroll painting), based on 12th and 13th century copies (Figure 2.11). The style of the Tale of Genji emaki is unique. The figures and their clothing are angular and stylized, and reflect Heian Period court dress. In the anime Kai Doh Maru and The Tale of Genji similar attributes can be traced to the Heian Period events they depict. However, in these films the faces are highly stylized, as are the clothes. The figures lose their form in the geometric robes. Also, the details of the faces come directly from the emaki. The tiny eyes, eyebrows, and lips of the figures are echoed throughout the anime. In this case, the

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27 Noma, 149.
heavy outlines of traditional anime are replaced by the finer outlines resembling those of the scroll painting.

The technical aspects of Neon Genesis Evangelion are very similar to other anime. As mentioned regarding Japanese animation, the movement of the characters and other objects is often quite stiff and jerky. This convention is exhibited in EVA through the movement of the mouths of the characters when they speak, while none of the other parts of the face seem to move. The jaws, eyes, and facial expressions very seldom change. Restricted, jerky movement is not limited to speech but can often be found in the overall actions of characters. In EVA this type of movement is often complemented by swift cuts and fast-paced action sequences. However, in the slower scenes, the limited number of animation cells becomes more evident. In addition to the traditional methods of hand-drawn animation cells, the films utilize computer graphic animations for some of the more complicated scenarios. Even so, the movement is very similar and only slightly smoother than is typical in the series. Although EVA was not the first anime to utilize computer animation, it reflects the beginning of the movement toward reliance on computers to make movement smoother, lighting more realistic, and camera angles more dramatic.

Aesthetically, EVA fits into the history of anime through many of the typical conventions of the medium. The large heads, large eyes, and disproportionately long, thin bodies are an adaptation of the traditional look of anime characters based on Osamu Tezuka’s precedent (see Figures 1.1 and 1.3). The unrealistic depiction of many of the characters and elements in EVA is a result of the established use of thick, black outlines
and flat planes of color with little shading. As with other anime, this flat use of color finds its roots in the yamato-e and ukiyo-e. Often, the background of many anime seem more detailed than the characters or objects set against it (see Figure 1.2). The shading of the moving elements of anime is seldom a priority, leaving the figures flat. There is an attempt at naturalism; however, this attempt is often overshadowed by the unrealistic qualities of the characters. Throughout the majority of the series, EVA stylistically resembles many other anime. There are specific scenes in the final episode of the television series and the films that reference the entire visual history of anime.

Each of these traditional elements of anime is utilized by Neon Genesis Evangelion. Interestingly, what sets EVA apart from many other anime is precisely this reliance on the conventions discussed above. By relying on these elements and highlighting them as aspects of the storyline, EVA uses the stylistic lineage of anime as a convention that can be broken down in ways that are atypical for anime. There are sequences in all three of the endings (the television series, Death & Rebirth, and End of Evangelion) that utilize montages of deep color saturation, line drawings, crayon scribbling, character sketches or even overlaying of one character’s outline with the image of another (Figure 2.12). Many of the images from these sequences make the viewer aware of the medium itself; the suspension of disbelief is broken in a manner akin to breaking the fourth wall in film. The best examples from these sequences are the crayon scribbling (Figure 2.13) and drawing on the cell itself (Figure 2.14) in End of Evangelion. In cases where there is drawing on the cells themselves, images of the

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28 This is achieved when a character looks directly at the camera and addresses the audience, thus showing the audience that they are watching film and not real life.
familiar characters are visible behind the lines etched into the film. Thus, the two-dimensional quality of the medium is emphasized. This technique foregrounds the material of film and interferes with the illusion of the moving picture. There are also images in the montages that incorporate the use of animated blocks of color in the shapes of the characters, without the typical, heavy black outlines (Figure 2.15). These moving, flat areas of color serve a similar purpose as the crayons and lines to make these montages self-referential. The effect is that the ties between the viewer and the storyline are broken, even if only momentarily. While these methods draw attention to the medium of film, they do not specifically refer to the medium of *anime*.

A sequence that specifically alludes to *anime*, however, is found in Episode 26. Much like the montage found in *End of Evangelion*, this sequence depicts the psychological events that Shinji undergoes during the HI Project. In this series of images the medium of *anime* is broken down into its various components. In the most basic sense, *anime* is comprised of painted cells that, when combined and viewed rapidly, create the illusion of movement in the drawing. In the final episode of EVA the characters stop moving and are drawn in various ways, including the complex, mature, detailed images found throughout the rest of the series as well as basic ink drawings in black and white (Figure 2.16). These flat, black-and-white images recall the *manga* on which *anime* are commonly based and from which *anime* developed. At the same time, this lack of detail and color draws attention to the fact that *anime* begins with hand-drawn

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29 For the purposes of this paper I will need to present some of the images out of chronological order, although all of the images are found in the same episode.
30 EVA is unusual in that it is not based on a *manga* series, although a *manga* of EVA was written after the series’ debut on television.
images. These flat sketches develop to include multiple characters depicted with some transparent color, still retaining the *manga*-like qualities of the print medium (Figure 2.17). Interestingly, these immobile line drawings and ink sketches speak just like the characters normally would; however, here, no parts of the figures move, not even the mouths. This lack of motion highlights the non-naturalistic type of movement typical to *anime* by stopping all motion entirely. This stillness also refers back to *manga* and the lack of motion on the printed page. The most interesting deconstruction in this montage is found when all color and most line and other form is removed but movement is retained. For example, a moving, talking image of Shinji is comprised of only his eyebrows, eyes and mouth – there is not even a nose, much less a chin, hair, or surrounding features (Figure 2.18). In spite of this lack of detail, emotion is conveyed and the image, synched with the dialogue, speaks just as if it were the fully fleshed-out Shinji. This moving sketch of Shinji’s face isolates the fact that what separates *anime* from *manga* is the illusion of movement.

The sophisticated, self-referential quality of EVA sets it apart from many other *anime*. By isolating line, color, and movement *Neon Genesis Evangelion* indicates that it, in fact, finds its roots in the flat medium of *manga*, Japanese painting, and prints. Furthermore, this reference highlights many, if not all, of the artistic and stylistic roots of both *manga* and *anime*, historicizing EVA in the artistic development of Japan. This artistic heritage is essential to placing EVA in its cultural context. The stylistic lineage of EVA is distinctly Japanese and, as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the narrative and subject matter are deeply rooted in Japanese culture as well.
Chapter 3: Existing Western Scholarship.

Lauded by some as the “single greatest anime series ever made,” Neo Genesis Evangelion has been interpreted in a variety of ways by Western scholars. Susan J. Napier has said that the subject matter of EVA consists mainly of sexual, psychological and Judeo-Christian religious content. Although there is some merit to such interpretations, there is a great deal of evidence in the series and films that has been ignored by Napier and other Western scholars that points toward a Japanese, rather than Western, heritage. In particular, I suggest a deep understanding of Buddhist cosmology and philosophy is present in EVA. In other words, as one delves deeper into EVA, one finds that the Judeo-Christian imagery – while clearly present – cannot account for many of the narrative twists, turns, and developments. Similarly, the Western identification of sexual and psychological traits are also supportable to some extent. These features may also reflect indigenous Japanese and specifically Buddhist concepts. In addition, I suggest that there is a larger contextual basis at work in this series and the two films that can account for the specific elements that many scholars have deemed “confusing.”

By examining EVA in its own cultural context, I believe that the apparent contradictions that have baffled Western scholars disappear. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the stylistic and visual/formal sources for EVA are decidedly Japanese.

32 Napier (2005), 266–270.
and I argue here that the same is, not surprisingly, largely true for the plot, narrative, characters, and other aspects of the story. For the purposes of this study, I have selected the main themes that pervade Western scholarship on EVA. These include religious, psychological, apocalyptical, and other interpretations. Most of the existing theories focus on the main character, Shinji Ikari, and his psychological development/crisis.

There are only a few readings of the series and films available in English that hint of a Japanese orientation. The overwhelming majority of Western scholarship on EVA ignores the specific cultural context of Japan. Dani Cavallaro, in her book *Anime Intersections*, attempts a holistic examination of EVA and in her section on religion discusses both the Judeo-Christian elements as well as the Japanese themes. In the section discussing these religious themes and imagery she explicitly states that:

> even though [the] thematic motifs are drawn from both Japanese and Judeo-Christian frames of reference and the latter discourse often appears to have been accorded a central position, the Eastern dimension is ultimately a more vitally sustaining source of inspiration, and the Western baggage fundamentally functions as a narrative and iconological enhancer.\(^{34}\)

Just before this statement, Cavallaro discusses the significant Shinto elements and the relevant Japanese myths found in EVA. Although her examination is thorough and well positioned in Japanese culture, even Cavallaro does not mention any Buddhist elements in her research. It is from this point that I plan to fill in the gaps in scholarship on EVA and to present the Buddhism inherent in the imagery and narrative. In order to do so, I will first examine the Western-centered scholarship on this *anime*.

\(^{34}\) Cavallaro (2007), 58.
Religious

Judeo-Christian themes are evident in the visual elements of EVA; however, I argue that they do not have the significance that has been attributed to them. Due to a few key images, that will be discussed in detail below, many scholars have overemphasized the Judeo-Christian elements and use these images as the main source of support for their theories. These main images are found, primarily, in the final films *Death & Rebirth* and *End of Evangelion*. However, many of the images with Judeo-Christian roots are mentioned in the narrative of the series as well. These symbols are misleading to a non-Japanese audience and, I propose, also serve as a means to make the Buddhist elements less recognizable to a Japanese audience.

The most widely used Judeo-Christian elements in EVA are the names of particular creatures. Adam, Lilith, Eva, and what has been translated from *shito* as Angels are all names deeply entrenched in Judeo-Christian mythology. In EVA, however, they do not correspond with the concepts in the West. For example, Adam and Lilith are discussed in the narrative as having a connection to the creation of humankind but they are, more importantly, a means to its destruction. It is never stated directly in the narrative of EVA but the final result of the information provided by the *anime* is that the Angels are the offspring of Adam while humanity is the offspring of Lilith. 35 This concept is quite different from the Judeo-Christian origin myth that involves characters named Adam and Lilith in which Eve is the progenitor of humanity. The “Angels” of EVA are not angels in the Christian sense either, but are a succession of alien intruders.

35 Cavallaro (2007), 56.
The translation of the name *shito* as “Angels” reinforces the Judeo-Christian reading of the *anime*. Many of the scholars who focus on the Judeo-Christian elements use them as support for an apocalyptical analysis of the series. However, I suggest that they are used as an exotic iconography. The Tree of Life from Kabbalah (Figure 3.1), the Lance of Longinus from Christianity (Figure 3.2), and the repetition of cruciform images (Figure 3.3) do not have their original Western meanings in the reality of the *anime*’s narrative. These symbols are part of the climax of the series and films and, as such, do not represent the Judeo-Christian concepts they typically symbolize.

It is not possible to dismiss these images entirely; however, it is necessary to frame them within the larger concepts of EVA and allot them only the significance they deserve within that context. The most over-enthusiastic Western religious interpretation is found in an article by Mariana Ortega in which she makes clear her goal to discuss EVA in a religious and psychosexual manner. This article relies heavily on the imagery of the objects discussed above, such as the Lance of Longinus, the Tree of Life, and the multitude of cruciform objects that litter the visual landscape of this *anime*. Ortega attempts to situate the narrative, and thus the imagery, of EVA in a specifically Jewish and Christian framework. She does this in parallel with what she expresses as the relevant psychological dilemmas. For example, by discussing the Judeo-Christian

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37 Ortega, 220.

38 Ortega, 222.
significance of Lilith and the role of mothers in both EVA and Judaism, she can then apply a Freudian reading to the series and films.\textsuperscript{39}

However, as Dani Cavallaro points out, many of these supposedly Judeo-Christian symbols are multivalent. Cavallaro suggests that many of these images have parallels in Shinto mythology as well as that of the Judeo-Christian religions. For example, Cavallaro suggests that the Spear of Destiny (or Lance of Longinus, see Figure 3.2) is actually a reference to the lance used to create the earth in the \textit{Nihongi}, a Shinto text about the origin myths of Japan, the world and, humanity.\textsuperscript{40} Ortega leans heavily on the Judeo-Christian images as a reading of EVA. However, while the visual images occur, the narrative does not support many of the claims made by Judeo-Christian religious interpretation. EVA is not a retelling of a Judeo-Christian myth. In fact, much of what is discussed by characters and many of the events depicted in EVA are not Judeo-Christian at all and illustrate a Buddhist worldview as I will show in Chapter 4.

It is interesting to note that in her research, Mariana Ortega did not include the following quote attributed to EVA’s assistant director Kazuya Tsurumaki:

There are a lot of giant robot shows in Japan, and we did want our story to have a religious theme to help distinguish us. Because Christianity is an uncommon religion in Japan we thought it would be mysterious. None of the staff who worked on Eva are Christians. There is no actual Christian meaning to the show, we just thought the visual symbols of Christianity look cool. If we had known the show would get distributed in the US and Europe we might have rethought that choice.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Ortega, 222.
\textsuperscript{40} Cavallaro (2007), 58.
This quote clearly addresses the issue of Christianity and the intentionality of EVA’s makers. In addition, it raises the question of intended audiences. Clearly, the intended audience is Japanese. Thus the concept of exoticism arises. The exotic nature of the Judeo-Christian elements, as mentioned in Tsurumaki’s quote above, undermines the centrality some scholars attribute to them. In her paper, *The Alienated Hero of Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Lauren Gardner suggests that she will examine the “sense of ‘otherness’” that the Judeo-Christian elements bring to Japanese audiences of EVA. However, she fails to do so from a Japanese cultural perspective. When she does discuss what she deems “otherness,” she does not juxtapose the exotic Judeo-Christian images with the more indigenous Buddhist or Shinto themes. Gardner implies that this “otherness” foreshadows the “impending apocalypse” of the end of the series and films. She, as well as other scholars, as will be shown, use the Judeo-Christian images to emphasize and support their view of an apocalyptical ending to EVA.

**Apocalyptical**

The large-scale explosions and massive destruction depicted in the final installments of the EVA narrative have led many scholars to conclude that the storyline takes an apocalyptical turn. Many *anime* do in fact exhibit apocalypse as the final outcome. Indeed, it is a common trope in *anime* narrative; however, the use of the term

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43 Gardner, 34.
44 Gardner, 34.
45 Such as the popular *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988), *Space Battleship Yamato* (Leiji Matsumoto, 1974), or *Memories* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1995).
apocalypse is misleading when discussing the films of *Neon Genesis Evangelion.* Although the term apocalypse implies different ideas, the most common implication by scholars is complete and utter annihilation that is unalterable. In this sense, apocalypse simply does not happen in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. By the end of the series and films, individuals are themselves again and, although the terrain of the Earth is forever changed, the world has not ended.46

Susan J. Napier, in her book *Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle,* discusses EVA from a psychological perspective, suggesting a personal apocalypse for the main character47 as well as an apocalypse for all of humanity.48 In her article “When the Machines Stop,” Napier discusses the apocalypse that she finds in EVA in detail as related to salvation49 and the genre of apocalyptical *anime* that precedes EVA.50 In this framework, Napier does not question the use of the term apocalypse and does not offer a reconciliation of the term and the finale of the series or films. She points out, ironically, that the final outcome of the series is not one of utter annihilation but still continues to rely on the word apocalypse.51

The central event of what has been deemed an apocalypse by these scholars is the Human Instrumentality Project, which must be examined in detail. There are moments in this portion of the narrative when there are no humans or when it may seem that there is

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47Napier (2005), 270.
48Napier (2005), 267.
49Napier (2002), 424.
50Napier (2002), 420.
going to be no continuation of “life as we know it.” The climax of the films does not imply annihilation at all. However, it is important to note here that, currently, no scholarly explanation has been given for what these events actually describe. As indicated, many find that this is an apocalypse, designed to wipe humanity off the face of the Earth. Lauren Gardner discusses the supposed apocalypse of EVA alongside her religious interpretation. As Gardner states, “the purpose of the apocalypse is the loosening and destruction of identity and individual boundaries, not the world itself.”

However, this is where she stops the investigation without discussing the ramifications of this statement. She implies that the HI Project is synonymous with apocalypse when in fact the HI Project does not result in an irreversible annihilation. Without addressing it outright, Gardener has delved to the root of the problem but has missed the point. She maintains that this is a type of apocalypse but misuses the term. In the same sentence Gardner uses the term apocalypse and states that this apocalypse is not a “destruction of [. . .] the world itself.” This contradiction is the epitome of the apocalyptical scholarship on EVA. As I will propose in Chapter 4, these misunderstandings and confusing nuances can be explained through a Buddhist reading of EVA. In fact, the title of the first film, *Death & Rebirth*, implies not an ending but a rebirth. In addition, much of this misunderstanding about the nature of the conclusions of the series and the films arises out of a reliance on a psychological reading of EVA.

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52 Gardner, 40.
53 Gardner, 40.
The psychological interpretations of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* are primarily based on the main character, Shinji. Shinji is an adolescent boy who faces many different challenges while piloting his EVA Unit 01. He is also placed in a challenging position that is very different from the other children pilots because his father is the commander of the NERV operation in Tokyo-3. This relationship, combined with his own neuroses, makes Shinji’s development throughout the series much more dramatic than that of the other characters. Shinji’s insecurities and neuroses center around his difficulties with piloting his Eva Unit and his fear of disappointing his father. Shinji feels that he is inadequate in most areas of his life, including his relationships with his fellow pilots. This dramatic tension has drawn the attention of many scholars, enough so that the series is sometimes referred to as a “coming-of-age drama.”54 There is much focus on Shinji’s personal relationships as well as his own internal struggles. Through Shinji’s relationships with others, especially his father, he grows as a character, and this growth is illustrated by his neurosis and insecurities.

These insecurities are a main focus of the scholarship about EVA. Many of the Western interpretations are Freudian in nature and base Shinji’s insecurities in his dysfunctional relationship with his father, Gendou Ikari.55 Shinji’s repetitive pronouncements of his deficiency in all areas of his life illustrate what has been interpreted as his deep-seated fear of being rejected by his father.56 There are many

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54 Napier (2005), 102.
55 Gardner, 25.
56 Napier (2005), 99.
instances in both the series and the films that may seem to necessitate a Freudian interpretation because of Shinji’s distant, often absent, father and his deceased mother. For example, Mariana Ortega suggests that when Shinji is placed inside his Eva Unit it is like a return to the womb in light of the fact that his Eva Unit is constructed with DNA from his mother.\(^{57}\) Susan J. Napier emphasizes Shinji’s distant relationship with his father\(^{58}\) and psychosexual interpretations of Shinji’s relationships with the women in his life.\(^{59}\)

With each of the female characters, Rei, Asuka, and Misato, Shinji has a strange tense relationship. Napier suggest that this tension is a result of Shinji’s lack of a mother figure and unrealized sexual desires.\(^{60}\) For example, Shinji is attracted to Misato but also needs her to be a reliable adult figure in his life. She is not and in \textit{Death & Rebirth} she comes home drunk and accidently falls asleep in Shinji’s bed instead of her own. This scene’s tension is conveyed through Shinji’s facial expressions as well as through eyeline matches between his eyes and Misato’s breasts. I argue that this insight to Shinji’s attraction to Misato emphasizes his need for stability and, thus, a secure identity, not his unrealized desire for his mother. This need for a stable identity that is rooted in parent figures also explains Shinji’s fear of rejection from his father. He does whatever he can to impress his father in the hope that his father will show him love and affection. In this way, Shinji seeks forgiveness from his father for the guilt he feels about his mother’s death and affirmation that his choices are the correct ones.

\(^{57}\) Ortega, 226.
\(^{58}\) Napier (2005), 99.
\(^{59}\) Napier (2005), 100.
\(^{60}\) Napier (2005), 100.
The scenes that are the main focus of the psychological debate are centered around the Human Instrumentality Project. This key portion of the plot takes place in Shinji’s psyche and could be deemed psychological. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, there is much more to this series of events than what occurs in Shinji’s mind. The complex events that unfold in the Human Instrumentality Project are not limited to Shinji and his psychological development. To explain them as such or as his “sexual coming of age”\textsuperscript{61} omits the internal reality of the series as well as the effect these events have on the whole of humanity. More often than not, scholars get close to these underlying themes in EVA but dismiss them as inexplicable. Nevertheless, there is a definite psychological quality to EVA that should not be ignored but can be examined in line with the Buddhist worldview presented by the narrative of the \textit{anime}.

\textsuperscript{61} Napier (2005), 102.
Chapter 4: EVA in a Japanese Cultural Context.

After situating *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in its appropriate Japanese visual context and refuting the Western scholarship on the *anime*, I will now propose a specifically Japanese reading of the series and films. This Japanese cultural reading of EVA is based, primarily, in Buddhism and this worldview, I argue, is central to the narrative of the *anime*. EVA does not present a literal, canonical representation of Buddhism but does, I suggest, utilize universal Buddhist principles in the created reality of the series and films. The main Buddhist principles that are found in the imagery and narrative of EVA are the illusion of the ego, the goal of non-duality and enlightenment, and the inevitability of *karma* and *samsara*. The portion of the films that exhibits the Buddhist principles most fully is the Human Instrumentality Project, which is part of the conclusion of the plot of EVA as it occurs in *Death & Rebirth* and *End of Evangelion*. In this section of the films, the Buddhist principles are combined with Tantric imagery and ideas that build on the Buddhist worldview presented throughout the series. Due to the use of these elements in the climax of the EVA films, I suggest that the Buddhist principles essentially overshadow any Judeo-Christian, psychological, or other interpretations.

*Plot of the Films*

The Buddhist elements found within the films and the overall Buddhist worldview present in both the series and the films, are best understood in the plot of the films. The
first feature-length film begins with a summary of the series. *Death & Rebirth* is divided into two sections or episodes. The first episode, “Death,” recounts many of the events of the series including the historic Second Impact and a montage of each of the Angel attacks. This episode is essentially a director’s cut of the entire series, and very little new information is revealed in this episode. However, the second episode, titled “Rebirth,” supplies new information that builds on the foundations of the series. The events of “Rebirth” center around the military conflicts between NERV and SEELE. In order to initiate what NERV has been trying to prevent, SEELE attacks NERV headquarters in an attempt to gain access to Lilith. The attacks are begun with human soldiers and ordinary military munitions, such as tanks and bombs. However, as Shinji struggles with his own inadequacies as an Eva pilot, SEELE launches an attack using nine Eva units they have made in secret, referred to in the narrative as the production series. Asuka, in Unit 02, is called to defend NERV by herself as the nine production series circle overhead (Figure 4.1). At this point, the episode, and thus the film, ends.

Since “Rebirth” ends before the Human Instrumentality Project (HI Project for abbreviation) commences, some scholars have suggested that the conclusion in the second film, *End of Evangelion*, is an alternative ending. I suggest, however, that the conclusion of the final film is, in fact, an elaboration on the endings of the series and the first film, and not an alternative. The first segment of the second film is almost identical to the last episode of *Death & Rebirth*. The fighting between SEELE and NERV continues much as it did in the previous installments; however, in *End of Evangelion*

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there is additional action that leads up to the beginning of the HI Project. Whereas *Death & Rebirth* ends with the circling Eva production series, *End* continues through Asuka's battle with them and her victory. However, these EVA units regenerate and, ultimately, defeat Asuka and her Eva Unit 02. Simultaneously, Shinji, who has been rather inactive and quite paralyzed by fear,\(^{63}\) has the revelation that there is a part of his mother somehow incorporated in the EVA Unit that he pilots.\(^{64}\) As his Unit 01 begins to move by itself, Shinji is propelled to help Asuka, but arrives too late. When Shinji arrives at the scene of the battle he screams in terror, ending the first episode of *End of Evangelion*.

In the beginning of the next episode Shinji, in his EVA Unit, is attacked but not yet pierced by the Lance of Longinus\(^{65}\) as it flies into earth's atmosphere. Subsequently, the nine EVA production series impale the aloft Unit 01 and hold it captive with Shinji inside. The story line then bounces between the events unfolding in Earth’s atmosphere and the chaos in NERV headquarters. Inside Terminal Dogma, Rei initiates the beginning of the HI Project by merging with the captive Lilith. At this point, Rei becomes giant and, when standing fully upright, towers above the Earth. She reaches out and cradles the aloft Eva Unit 01 while the nine production series circle around them (Figure 4.2). The nine EVA production series begin to merge with Rei’s energy as each of them transforms, revealing her face on each unit. This transformation, in addition to the frightening size of

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\(^{63}\) Shinji has been forced along much of this portion of the narrative by Misato and her pleading for him to help defend NERV. She, in order to save Shinji and ultimately the world, sacrifices herself to get him safely to his Eva Unit.

\(^{64}\) In fact, all of the EVA Units seem to have a portion of the mothers of the respective pilots incorporated into their genetic makeup, although few characters are aware of this fact.

\(^{65}\) This is a large spear wielded by the Eva Units to keep Lilith immobile, which, in a previous episode, had been embedded in the surface of the moon by Rei and her Eva Unit 00.
the giant Rei, terrifies Shinji and his ego begins to implode. This is the beginning of the HI Project and where, in my opinion, the narrative switches to the interior of Shinji’s consciousness. From here until the end of the film, the narrative vacillates between the psyche of Shinji, artistically rendered, and the actuality of the HI Project. By presenting the interior of Shinji’s thoughts, the story is able to depict his choices and the effects they have on the real world.

Inside Shinji’s psyche he confronts each of the important characters in his life and how they perceive him. This is a significant element to his psychological development and the choices he makes regarding the HI Project. As the HI Project is intended to make all beings one, the physical depiction of this is the “melting” of individual humans into a yellow-orange liquid (called LCL in the films), accompanied by a faint popping sound. This is the visual representation of the dissolution of the AT Fields (Absolute Terror Fields) that maintain human individuality. In actuality, the HI Project’s onscreen depiction is nearly impossible to explain and is best understood by viewing the segment. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will quote Dani Cavallaro's excellent synopsis of the visuals of the HI Project:

While the world undergoes its momentous metamorphosis, Shinji’s psyche appears to be caught in a luminal domain between individuality and undifferentiation, which suggests that his acceptance of Instrumentality cannot yet be taken for granted. The character’s internal ordeal is communicated by means of two complex montages. The first of these consists of a barrage of extremely fast-paced juxtapositions and superimpositions of shots from the TV series, pencil sketches, character studies, collages and abstract shards of color. Following a brief intermission offering close-ups of Shinji’s, Misato’s and Rei’s profiles, the

66 This is according to the narrative of the film and the dialogue spoken by Commander Ikari’s aide and the repetition of “I can’t take it anymore” by Shinji himself.
second montage focused quite blatantly on Shinji’s specifically sexual anxieties, displaying protean representations of the human body (which include elements of live-action footage) distorted by recourse to filters that emulate the look of watercolor washes.\(^\text{67}\)

This artistic display occurs while all of the bodies of individuals are disintegrating into the one large mass called the “Sea of LCL.” By the end of this series of events, Shinji finds himself alone in this sea with Rei and must make a choice: to remain as one or to return to individual forms. Although the final scene of the film does not suggest that the world has returned to normal unscathed, Shinji’s choice is clear and humans become individual bodies once again.

These events, I propose, are closely linked to a type of “mass enlightenment” where every individual is forced out of his ego-deluded existence and into a type of nirvana.\(^\text{68}\) In fact, Lauren Gardner’s statement from Chapter 3 supports my argument for a mass enlightenment and not an apocalypse. She suggests that the ending is a “destruction of identity”\(^\text{69}\) and therefore the idea of an apocalypse is improbable and the concept of the merging of all identities into the universal becomes more likely. Overall, this is a difficult concept to address as the visual representations of nirvana are scarce but it seems that the director and his team have done a superb job of illustrating one of the most abstract concepts in Buddhism.

**Buddhist Worldview**

I suggest that the central dilemma that Shinji faces is his irreconcilable delusion that he possesses an ego, a self, and is separate from the rest of humanity. Shinji, as we

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\(^{67}\) Cavallaro (2009), 104.
\(^{68}\) Nirvana in the sense of final cessation, not the concept of initial enlightenment, as some interpret it.
\(^{69}\) Gardner, 34.
shall see, constantly fears that he will not live up to his role as an EVA pilot and struggles with the concept that his self is defined by his relationships with those around him. This is most evident in the ending of the films, as discussed in the previous section on the plot of the films. The culmination of the HI Project is somewhat convoluted and very complicated. Essentially, the HI Project is the melding of Lilith with a human in order to give Shinji the choice to end fear and give humanity a different existence. This manifestation of the Project was designed by Shinji’s father, Gendou, thus placing Shinji at the center of the conflict. As discussed above, the HI Project is an internal and external event, affecting Shinji and all of humanity.

Buddhism holds that, ultimately, there is no self, no ego (anātman).70 The individual is presented with the illusion of an ego. Buddhism does not propose that we are not unique individuals but that our uniqueness deceives us into believing that we have separate, independent selves. This delusion comes from the gahakāraka, or “the builder of the house.”71 The gahakāraka allows the individual to believe that he has a separate ego that is independent of others. However, within Buddhism the concept of a separate ego is known to be a delusion that a practitioner must overcome in order to reach enlightenment. Although he does not state it directly, Thomas Kasulis’ “unique overlap

of interdependent processes defining who a person is in Buddhism could be considered the gahakāraka.

The concept of the gahakāraka has particular relevance to EVA in the AT Fields that are a main component of the narrative. As discussed above, the AT Field is what separates individuals from one another. In Death & Rebirth, the AT Field is referred to as “a sacred territory in which no one may intrude […] merely that wall that encloses one’s mind.” Therefore, much like “the builder of the house,” the AT Field is the psychological separation between individuals that allows humanity to maintain individuality but, in the narrative of EVA, they maintain our individual physical forms as well. The AT Fields provide the delusion of separation only because humans believe in them. Within the narrative of the HI Project, the AT Fields break down and individuals cease to be separate. This event illustrates the interdependent nature of egos through the implication that all beings are comprised of the same material and can cease to be separate, individual beings, reflecting the Buddhist concept of anātman.

The construction of the ego is not only a result of the gahakāraka but is also a result of one’s interactions with other individuals in an interdependent manner. This concept is illustrated, in Buddhism, through the metaphor of Indra’s Net. Indra’s Net is the Buddhist concept that the individual ego is represented by a jewel on a net at each intersection. These jewels reflect all of the other jewels on the net, suggesting that no ego

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72 Kasulis, 62.
73 Death & Rebirth.
is completely independent of other individuals. Thus, those reflections comprise, in the Buddhist worldview, the individual’s ego.\footnote{Cook, Francis H. \textit{Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra} (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 2.}

Shinji’s relationships with the various characters in the series help to define who he is and how he sees himself. This is not a passive aspect of the narrative but is foregrounded in a way that presents the struggle between independence and interdependence. Shinji, in his insecurity, is unsure if he likes his independent ego but is also unwilling or unable to believe what others say they perceive him to be. In one scene in the last episode of the television series, Shinji is confronted by the perceptions of Asuka, Rei, and Misato about him.\footnote{Episode 26.} Through the points of view of this supporting cast of characters, Shinji must evaluate his own identity. Each of the characters presents a different aspect of Shinji’s individuality back toward him along with their own ideas of themselves.\footnote{Episode 26.} He refuses to accept any of the positive views about himself due to his insecurities about his worth and value as an individual, yet, simultaneously, he struggles with the idea that his ego is a construction of all of these assessments: his own and those of Asuka, Rei, and Misato, as well as the others in his life not directly referenced in this scene. Although this scene relies heavily on the psychological aspects of Shinji’s experience, it is important to note the emphasis on identity and individuality as well.

The narrative describes the events of the HI Project as vague at best and most scholars interpret the ending of EVA as enigmatic. When discussing the events of the HI Project, Susan J. Napier states, dismissingly, “while the words [of the narrative] are

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{Cook, Francis H. \textit{Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra} (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 2.}
\footnotetext{Episode 26.}
\footnotetext{Episode 26.}
\end{footnotes}
redolent of Buddhist terminology, the visuals are self-reflexively anime-esque.” This is the only time Napier, in any of her published works on EVA, mentions Buddhism and, here, her sentence construction suggests that to be Buddhist and self-reflexive of anime are mutually exclusive properties. She does not investigate this sentence any further and Buddhism is not mentioned again in this article. I contend that EVA’s use of self-reflexive visuals, as discussed in Chapter 2, do not exclude Buddhist principles but, as I will show, highlight the existence of these concepts in the films.

I have interpreted these final scenes, which involve the integration of Rei and Shinji, as a type of redistribution of bija, or seeds, the theoretical place holders of one’s karma. This culmination of events appears to be a type of “mass enlightenment” that involves all of humanity and not just the enlightenment of individuals on their own paths. This sequence allows Shinji to decide the fate of humanity. He has the choice to allow all of humankind to become peaceful, without fear, and to be one without bodies or boundaries.

This choice is visually reinforced by the disintegration of individuals into a type of orange plasma. I propose that this plasma is a visual representation of the combined punya and klesa of the entire world. An individual’s punya and klesa are his karma and determine his rebirth. Part of the goal of the HI Project is to make all individuals into one, as a type of evolution. It is through these scenes that Shinji realizes that he is only an individual because of the fact that others perceive him to be so. Toward the end of this

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77 Napier (2002), 427.
78 End of Evangelion.
79 Punya, or “merit,” is the positive aspect of karma while klesa, or “obstruction,” is the negative aspect.
psychological exercise, Shinji is confronted by an apparition of his mother. Just after this confrontation, Shinji “wakes up” to find himself entangled with Rei (Figure 4.3). It is at this moment that the two storylines converge and Shinji’s reality begins to match that of others. This entanglement is said, by Rei, to take place in the Sea of LCL where everyone is one, “a place with no AT Fields, where individual forms do not exist” and where there is no fear, no Absolute Terror fields. Thus, it is fear that separates us from each other and the universal. In Buddhism, this concept is paralleled through the fear of death that must be overcome. It is my interpretation that the combining of all of the world’s bija, good and bad, momentarily ends the cycle of rebirth, samsara, and forces humanity into non-duality. This concept is reflected in the first film’s title, Death & Rebirth, and is reiterated in the final film’s DVD release tagline. Across the top of the DVD case (see Figure 1.2) hovers the slogan: “The fate of destruction is also the joy of rebirth.” While all of the human race is in the plasma the main character has to decide whether he will go through with the completion of the HI Project. Shinji must decide if he wishes for existence to remain in this state or revert back to individual selves. He chooses to return to separate individuals with intact AT Fields. However, most of the Buddhist imagery is found in the interior scenes that Shinji must confront before making this ultimate decision.

It is my belief that this scene illustrates the main character’s choice between allowing all humanity to enter shunyata (illustrated through written cues) or to remain as imperfect humans. By becoming part of shunyata, humans are not only forced to

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80 From Rei’s dialogue in End of Evangelion.
81 Translated as the “void".
become enlightened but are forced into their nirvana as well. The text that flashes up in a scene directly related to the ending, one can see the use of the character for void (kou 空, or shunyata- red box added for emphasis, Figure 4.4). From the context of the anime the implications of the use of this term are not easy to dismiss. This use of the term “void” is not the only occurrence and is intrinsically linked to the HI Project.

These events are deemed purely psychological by scholars; however, I propose that they occur within Shinji’s Buddhist heart/mind (citta). Many references are made during this sequence to reality and the composition of one’s individual ego. When discussing EVA and its complex vision of reality, Susan J. Napier states that:

“the series questions the construction of human identity [...] in relation to the nature of reality itself. Providing more riddles than solutions, the series takes the viewer on a journey into both inner and outer reality before ultimately leaving both its characters and its audience floating in a sea of existential uncertainty.”

This so-called “existential uncertainty” is removed when the Buddhist philosophy of reality is applied to the narrative. As discussed above, Buddhism holds that there is no self or ego. In addition, each individual in Buddhism possesses a citta where one’s buddha-nature resides until enlightenment. The citta serves as a focus of meditation as well as the theoretical residence of all of Buddhist cosmology. In this way, reality can exist inside and outside of the individual. In EVA, reality and Shinji’s own psyche collapse into one another and become inseparable for a time during these final scenes. Further supporting this concept is the illusory separation between self and other,

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82 It should be noted that in Buddhist cosmology, all of the paradises exist in the heart/mind of the practitioner.
illustrated through the physical disintegration of bodies/individuals and through the artistic collapse of the animation itself into a series of line drawings, sketches and even crayon scribbling (Figure 4.5). This complete collapse, from which all the subsequent events unfold, reiterates the non-dual nature of EVA’s final outcome and explains the “riddles” left unanswered in Napier’s article.

There are even more instances in the final sequences of End of Evangelion that can be viewed from a Buddhist perspective. It is my opinion that this series of events takes place entirely in Trayastrimsa Paradise. This is the place in Buddhist cosmology where bija are weighed to determine future rebirths. One instance that stands out in this sequence is the final consultation between mother and son. This occurrence bears a striking resemblance to a story from the life of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni. After his enlightenment, Sakyamuni went to Trayastrimsa Paradise to teach the way to his mother. The confrontation between Shinji and Yui (Figure 4.6) happens in the internal portion of the HI Project, toward the end. The conversation mother and son have in this scene amounts to Shinji explaining that he has the answer and is no longer afraid, at which Yui comforts her son by agreeing and moving slowly away from him. Thus, Shinji gains emotional closure from his mother and can return to the “real” world. The parallel between the event involving Sakyamuni and his mother and this scene with Shinji and Yui is intensified if Shinji is deemed to have reached enlightenment through his previous choices. My interpretation holds that by choosing to return to individuals, Shinji, like Sakyamuni, addresses his mother post-awakening.

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84 See also the discussion of the stylistic elements and the self-referential qualities of EVA in Chapter 2.
Other images stand out in these final scenes as possibly Tantric in nature. The Tantric aspects are exemplified through the union of Shinji and Rei who is, according to Tantric theory, his counterpart and not his consort. In the image of the two together in the Sea of LCL (Figure 4.3) there is no true separation between them, implying they are not having intercourse as suggested by some scholars\(^8\) but are actually united as the appropriate counterparts, wisdom and compassion. This association is evidenced in the anime by the relationship between the main character and this female, who is, in fact, a clone of his mother. It is my interpretation that these two characters are representations of the same persona and that their union represents the union of the phenomena and the noumena and, thus, the unity of the individual with the universal. Their presence in the LCL reinforces the idea of a mass enlightenment. It is up to Shinji, with Rei’s help, to decide if humankind is ready for a forced enlightenment or if life should continue in the traditional way, with each individual struggling for his own awakening. By choosing to revert back to individual forms, Shinji upholds the free will and individual growth necessary for improving one’s karma in order to reach enlightenment.

A Buddhist interpretation answers many of the questions posed by Western scholars while also filling in gaps in their interpretations of Neon Genesis Evangelion. This enigmatic finale of the series and films, climaxing in End of Evangelion, looses most of its mystery when placed within the context of the Buddhist principles of non-duality, *karma*, and *samsara*.

\(^8\) Napier (2005), 101.
Chapter 5: Conclusion.

There is much left to be studied about *Neon Genesis Evangelion* that this paper cannot address. However, this research is an important step toward redirecting the study of EVA in Western literature toward a more balanced, holistic view. By positioning EVA in its cultural context there are more elements to be explored than the non-Japanese scholars have chosen to focus on up to this point. The examination of such a complex anime only through the lenses of Western concepts limits the understanding of this *anime*. Psychology, apocalypse, and religion are not wholly inaccurate examinations of this series, but they are inadequate. Expanding these categories to include Japanese art, philosophy, and religion allows for a reframing of the scholarly context of EVA.

The stylistic heritage of EVA can be traced back through Japanese art history to the Heian Period. This visual context is crucial to understanding EVA’s place in Japanese art. Similarly, this investigation of the stylistic aspects situates EVA in such a specific cultural context that the Japanese influence on the narrative elements more clear.

Through a more culturally specific analysis of EVA it is possible to understand more fully the Japanese and Buddhist elements. The Judeo-Christian elements are added to make the Buddhist themes seem more mystical and foreign but are synthesized in a manner that makes an entirely new type of myth or religion, specific to the narrative of the *anime*. Furthermore, this complex narrative helps enrich the application of Buddhist principles and philosophies in a context that is usually examined from a strictly secular
perspective by scholars. With the distraction of the apparent Judeo-Christian symbolism and the subtleties of the Buddhist imagery, the metaphysics of the series has been misinterpreted by many scholars seeking to find meaning where there may be none. Also, the Buddhist philosophies have bearing on the psychological interpretations as well and cannot be removed from their context in a Japanese film. To do so belittles the artistic and literary input from the creators. Reframing EVA in this way leads to a drastically different reading of the conclusion of the films as a type of mass enlightenment. The HI Project, central to this argument, exhibits the qualities of an imagined adaptation on the Buddhist principle of enlightenment that has been used to illustrate one boy’s struggle with non-duality and his ego.
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Appendix A: Illustrations.
Figure 1.1 Cover of *Death & Rebirth* DVD. (Tsuguhiko, Kadokawa, Ikekuchi Norio, Yamaga Hiroyuki, Kuramasu Takuma, Kazuya Tsurumaki, Masayuki, Shirai Hisao, et al. *Neon Genesis Evangelion. Death & Rebirth*. [United States]: Manga Video, 2002.)
Figure 1.2. Cover of *End of Evangelion*. (Mitsuhisa, Ishikawa, Ibusuki Taro, Shirai Hisao, Kato Hiroshi, Miki Sachiko, Sagisu Shiro, Sadamoto Yoshiyuki, and Hideaki Anno. *Neon Genesis Evangelion. The End of Evangelion*. [United States]: Manga Video, 2002.)
Figure 1.3. Shinji arrives in Tokyo 3. From Death & Rebirth.
Figure 1.4. Eva Units 02, 01, 00 (from left to right). (Cracked Entertainment “Robots” http://dvd.es/data/docs/20050825095934/Neon_Genesis_Evangelion_001.jpg, 2009. Accessed 24 Sept 2009.)
Figure 1.5. The creature Adam. From Death & Rebirth.
Figure 1.6. Misato (right) and Shinji (left). From *End of Evangelion.*
Figure 1.7. Rei and Asuka in elevator. (Rei on left, Asuka on right). From *Death & Rebirth.*
Figure 2.3. Osamu Tezuka’s *Buddha*. (Tezuka, Oasmu. *Buddha*. Translated by Maya Rosewood. Volumes 1 and 7. New York: Vertical Inc., 2007, 385.)
Figure 2.4. Kamakura Buddha. Bronze. 1885. Kamakura, Japan. (“File: Kamakura Buddha Daibutsu front 1885.jpg – Wikimedia Commons.”
Figure 2.5. “Early Spring landscape.” Interior wall painting in Phoenix Hall. 11th cen. Uji, Japan. (Artstor. artstor.org. 2009. Accessed 24 Sept 2009.)
Figure 2.6. 53 Stations on the Tokaido: Lake by Hakone. Utagawa Hiroshige. Woodblock print. c. 1833-1834.

Figure 2.7. Young geisha reads a kibyoshi. Kitagawa Utamaro. Woodblock print. c. 1792-1793. (Kern, Adam L. *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the kibyōshi of Edo Japan*. Cambridge: Havard University Asia Center, 2006, 135.)
Figure 2.12. Outline of Shinji filled with portrait of Rei (from Episode 26).
Figure 2.13. Crayon drawing from *End of Evangelion*. 
Figure 2.14. Lines on cell of *End of Evangelion.*
Figure 2.15. Figures of Asuka and Shinji with no outlines. From *End of Evangelion*.
Figure 2.16. Line drawing of Shinji floating in space. From Episode 26.
Figure 2.17. Shinji, Misato, Rei and Asuka. From Episode 26.
Figure 2.18. Shinji’s face in ink only. From Episode 26.
Figure 3.1. Tree of Life. From *End of Evangelion.*
Figure 3.2. Eva Unit 01 and the Lance of Longinus. From *End of Evangelion*.
Figure 3.3. Crucified Lilith. From *End of Evangelion*.
Figure 4.1. Final scene of *Death & Rebirth*. 
Figure 4.2. Giant Rei clasping Eva Unit 01. From *End of Evangelion.*
Figure 4.3. Rei and Shinji in Sea of LCL. From *End of Evangelion*. 
Figure 4.4. Text from *End of Evangelion*. 
Figure 4.5. Scratches over a cell of animation from *End of Evangelion*.
Figure 4.6. Shinji and Yui from *End of Evangelion*. 