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THE POSTMODERN THEOLOGY OF

“NEON GENESIS EVANGELION” AS A CRITICISM

This study analyzes Japanese animation series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ in the context of postmodern theology as a cultural analysis and criticism. My selection of the series as a research object is motivated by Hideaki Anno, the creator of the series, who used some Christian concepts, symbols and themes in ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’. ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ in all its variations is a specific mythology of the beginning and ending of life on Earth. The life on Earth began accidentally, and it was caused by the representatives of the dying extraterrestrial race (so-called ‘First Ancestral Race’). The life on Earth can be ended by human beings due to the humans’ scientific curiosity – their desire to know everything based on the feeling of loneliness and separation from something coherent whole (it’s manifested in relying on someone else’s opinion). The mythology of ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ constitutes a postmodern theology which echoes mainly Judeo-Christians doctrines through the use of such words as ‘Adam’, ‘Lilith’, ‘Eva’, ‘Evangelion’, ‘Angel’, ‘Spear of Longinus’ et cetera; but, in fact, ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ turns out to be a criticism of the extreme enthusiasm of mankind about science and technology and the Japanese collectivism.

Keywords: anime, apocalypse, criticism, genesis, mythology, postmodern, theology.

Within contemporary religious studies the discipline of postmodern theology is being established now [9; 16; 17; 19]. However, the term ‘postmodern theology’ doesn’t have a unified meaning – different postmodern theology scholars understand it in various ways [9; 19], but all of them, one way or another, boil down to “various forms of postmodern critical theory to help them analyze the contemporary cultural phenomena” [21, p. xxii] such as religion, faith, atheism, gods and other supernatural beings, secularity, myth etc. So, in other words, postmodern theology is forms of criticism of religion and related with religion things. One of these forms is postmodern theology as a cultural criticism presented by Netherlands cultural analytic Mieke Bal.

Mieke Bal thinks that “Western culture as we know and live it today was built on several interlocking structures, one of which was theological, specifically, Christian. Present-day culture in the West, therefore, cannot be understood without theology. Postmodern theology is the study of this presence of the past within the present” [3, p. 4]. Mieke Bal explains that in the following way: “As long as religious themes and narratives permeate a culture, they

partake of the ideological makeup of that culture. Clothed in the joint authority of moralism and aesthetics, the forms they take – be they framed as ‘high art or as ‘popular culture’ – belong to that domain of contemporary culture where theology has its part to play in the general critique, or deconstruction, of what makes that culture constrictive and limiting. A postmodern theology, then, need not decide whether God exists or not, and which one God has privileges over which other Gods in a multiple society. Instead, staying rigorously on the side of the human subjects who make up and are shaped by that culture, such an atheological theology can break open the con?ning limitations imposed by authoritarian religion and open up possibilities of different forms of relationality that are insensitive to old, ill-conceived taboos” [3, p. 21]. In general, Mieke Bal assumes that ‘theology’ is “the name for a specialization within the domain of cultural analysis that focuses, from the point of view of the integrative premises outlined above, on those areas of present-day culture where the religious elements from the past survive and hence ‘live’. Consequently, a postmodern theology must account for those aspects of that special domain that are “other” to the past. If the ?eld of study is the Bible, then postmodern theology must account for the social meanings, including the ‘literary’, political, and artistic ones, of biblical literature in today’s world – within the context of the heritages of other religions, other cultures. Sometimes the ?eld of study is what is traditionally called ‘art history’, namely those portions of visual culture that represent or evoke, or otherwise engage, religious traditions, or, to put it differently, those elements of religion that function in the visual domain. This ?eld includes medieval stained-glass windows as well as ?lms such as Robert Duvall’s *The Apostle* (1997). But the visual can no more be distinguished from expressions in other media than ?ctional or aesthetic objects can be from objects of everyday life. Postmodern theology is liable to study gospel traditions and convent life, denominational schools and the ideological makeup of charitable foundations, and the presence of religious discourse in lay politics and religious tenets in the practice and theory of law” [3, p. 6].

Mieke Bal links postmodern theology with Christianity, arguing that the existence of Christianity as a religious and cultural structures, informed the cultural imaginary of the Europeans, initiated postmodern theology [3, p. 5]. That is, according to Mieke Bal, postmodern theology is linked with Europe and Christianity, and that is in addition to postmodern theology considered as a cultural analysis and criticism. In this context, postmodern theology can be seen, inter alia, as a postmodern-theological analysis of Western films with a view to identifying the content related to Christianity in particular and to the religious in general.

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in the context of postmodern theology as a cultural analysis and criticism. My selection of the series as a research object is motivated by Hideaki Anno, the creator of the series, who used some Christian concepts, symbols and themes in ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’.

The screening of TV anime series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ on the Japanese television in 1995-1996 was a genuine event in the history of anime, and not just for the history of anime. The TV series was made in the genre ‘Sentai mecha’ which was a mix of two genres: ‘mecha’ (stories of humanlike robots) and ‘sentai’ (stories of work in team). However, Russian film critic Boris Ivanov notes that “it’s quite difficult to determine the genre of this series, and it’s simply impossible to describe its plot in a few lines. The life story of Shinji Ikari and other pilots of the biomechanical ‘giant robots’ of the ‘Evangelion’ series, who don’t fully understand why they are fighting the mysterious Angels, can be interpreted in many ways, each of which has a right to exist. For someone it is the confession of lost soul, and for someone it is a warning to science that has come too close to the secrets of life. The series is filled with quotes from the sacred texts of the whole world and a huge number of unresolved plot riddles, leaving viewers with space for their own imagination. Nevertheless, due to the proper marketing policy, the series found its audience and succeeded” [1, p. 156–157]. TV anime series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ generated the big franchise, the profit of which was over ?150 billion already by 2007 [15, p. 476], and even a brand new genre ‘seikaikei’ [14, p. 164–174]. The very creator of TV anime series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ Hideaki Anno emphasizes that ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is open for interpretation: “‘Evangelion’ is like a puzzle, you know. Any person can see it and give his/her own answer. In other words, we’re offering viewers to think by themselves, so that each person can imagine his/her own world. We will never offer the answers, even in the theatrical version. As for any ‘Evangelion’ viewers, they may expect us to provide the ‘all-about Eva’ manuals, but there is no such thing. Don’t expect to get answers by someone. Don’t expect to be catered to all the time. We all have to find our own answers” [2, p. 40–41]. That’s why there are a lot of studies of the TV anime series, for example: [4; 7, p. 59–110; 11; 12; 18].

‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is permeated with references to other anime, e. g. ‘Space Battleship Yamato’ (1974-1975), ‘Mobile Suit Gundam’ (1979-1980), ‘Devilman’ (1972) or ‘Akira’ (1988); to science fiction literature, for instance, Arthur C. Clarke’s ‘Childhood’s End’ (1953) or Philip K. Dick’s ‘The Divine Invasion’ (1981); to psychoanalysis and philosophy, for example, of Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard or Jean-Paul Sartre; and to religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Old Babylonian religion, Shintoism or Buddhism. The latter is remarkable in the light of what Australian media critic

Mick Broderick said: “Anno’s project is a postmodernist retelling of the Genesis myth, as his series title implies – *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. It is a new myth of origin, complete with its own deluge, Armageddon, apocalypse and transcendence” [6]. The very International title of the series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is loaded with a specific semantic content and, thus, may set a perspective for a perusal and interpretation of the series. The title consists of three Old Greek words: ‘Νεον γενεσις ευαγγελιον’. The word ‘γενεσις’ refers to the first book of the Old Testament – ‘Genesis’ that tells the story of creation of the world by God. The word ‘ευαγγελιον’ refers to the New Testament, actually to the Gospels, and is interpreted as ‘good news’, ‘good message’. Literally, the whole title, ‘Νεον γενεσις ευαγγελιον’, can be interpreted as ‘The good news about new creation’ or ‘The good message about new creation’ or ‘The Gospel of new creation’. In addition at will of the creators of ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ there are different versions of the story – and all of them are ‘canonical’; the very versions can be considered as Gospels. Now I’m talking about manga ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ (jap. *Shin Seiki Evangerion*, lit. ‘The Gospel of the New Century’) created by Yoshiyuki Sadamoto and published by Kadokawa Shoten from December 1994 to November 2014; TV anime series manga ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ (jap. *Shin Seiki Evangerion*, lit. ‘The Gospel of the New Century’) created by Hideaki Anno, aired from October 1995 to March 1996 and consisted of 26 episodes; anime film ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion: Death & Rebirth’ (jap. *Shin seiki Evangerion Gekijo-ban: Shi to Shinsei*, lit. ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion. Theatrical Version: Death and Rebirth’) directed by Hideaki Anno and released in March 1997; anime film ‘The End of Evangelion’ (jap. *Shin Seiki Evangerion Gekijo-ban: Ea/Magokoro o, Kimi ni*, lit. ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion. Theatrical Version: I will give you my heart’) directed by Hideaki Anno and released in July 1997; videogame for PlayStation 2 ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion 2’ (jap. *Shinseiki Evangerion 2*) based on interviews with Hideaki Anno; anime films ‘Rebuild of Evangelion’ (jap. *Evangerion Shin Gekijoban*, lit. ‘Evangelion: New Theatrical Versions’) consisted of 4 anime films (2007, 2009, 2012, 2020) and directed by Hideaki Anno (Chief director), Kazuya Tsurumaki, Masayuki, Mahiro Maeda. All those titles can be considered as ‘the canon’ of ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ and the sources for my study.

Chronologically, but not in that sequence as it’s shown in manga and anime, the story begins about 4,6 billion years ago. So-called ‘First Ancestral Race’, the inhabitants of one unknown planet in the Milky Way Galaxy, faced the menace of their unavoidable extinction. That was a reason for them to create seven progenitor beings called ‘the Seeds of Life’, each invested with the soul of a First Ancestral Race representative and placed within a carrier vessel called ‘Moon’. Every Moon contains the artifact called ‘the Spear of Longinus’, which

is a tool for penetrating A.T. (Anti-Terror)-Field, a protective field, needed to control the Seed in case of any contingencies, such as if two Seeds came to occupy the same planet; and the artifact called ‘the Dead Sea Scrolls’, a manual the First Ancestral Race sent along with each Seed of Life and the Spear of Longinus within each Moon.

On Earth one Seed of Life called ‘Adam’ was sent on the vessel called ‘the White Moon’ in order to inhabit the planet with its progeny – so-called ‘Angels’. But accidentally on Earth another vessel called ‘the Black Moon’ crashed: another Seed of Life called ‘Lilith’ was activated; the activation of Lilith couldn’t be stopped because the Lilith Spear of Longinus was broken. The very Seed of Life was something like ‘an evolutionary bomb’ (the term drawn from motion picture ‘Supernova’ (2000) directed by Walter Hill, Francis Ford Coppola and Jack Sholder), which explosion initiated an evolutionary process. The two evolutionary processes on one planet are considered unacceptable. That’s why the Adam’s Spear of Longinus blocked the activation of Adam. The crash of the Black Moon and activation of Lilith were the event called ‘the First Impact’. Lilith gave rise to mankind (known as ‘Lilin’).

Basically, the told in ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ story about the origin of life, including human one, on the planet Earth is like a variation of Panspermia, the hypothesis of distribution of living organisms or their fetuses through the space by natural objects like asteroids or by artificial objects like spacecrafts (see, for example, [5; 8; 13]). However, as a rule, Panspermia deals with microscopic life-forms and space dust, meteoroids, asteroids, comets, planetoids and human-made spacecrafts as distributors of those life-forms, because the hypothesis of Panspermia seeks to be scientifically credible and plausible, not fictional; and because for the time being the existence of the advanced intelligent extraterrestrial life-form is not justified yet.

In other words: Panspermia attempts to be in line with scientific discourse. ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ rather is in line with religious or philosophical or even theosophical discourse, and is somewhat resembled of techno-animistic conceptions (in the original meaning of the word ‘techno-animism’ [10]) or a UFO religion [20] or a possible mythology for some religious beliefs and practices like Scientology. It is easy to imagine how the story described above about an alien race that accidentally created a person on Earth could become a myth of some religion – you just need to add to this myth a ritual and a community of ministers of this religion.

However, ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is not limited to the doctrine of the origin (Genesis) of every living creature on Earth; it provides also the doctrine of the end (Apocalypse or Armageddon) of every living creature on Earth – mainly, *TV series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is about the end, and that end is*

caused by mankind.

The end starts from the find of Adam by expedition, led by Dr. Katsuragi, found in Antarctica in 2000. The humans experimented over Adam initiated so-called ‘the Second Impact’, global cataclysm. Basically, the humans launched the device of other evolutionary bomb which was Adam: the initiated line of evolution conflicted with the existing line of evolution. Adam, called ‘the First Angel’, gave rise to Angels who wished to free Adam hidden, as they thought, by the humans under Tokyo-3. Actually, everything is more complicated and twisted. One of the members of the expedition Dr. Katsuragi managed to survive after the Second Impact. It was Gendo Ikari. He literally absorbed Adam into his hand and then took out the First Angel from Antarctica. Gendo Ikari planned to use Adam to initiate the end of the world provoking the uniting souls of all living beings through the death into something one.

The United Nations created organization called ‘Gehirn’ (Ger. ‘brain’) reorganized later into organization called ‘Nerv’. The task of Gehirn and Nerv was to protect Earth from Angels. This is very interesting idea of the whole TV series: ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ shows us how people who do not consider themselves Christians would react to the appearance of the Angels from the Apocalypse of John, so called ‘the seven angels with seven trumpets’ with the help of which they announce the events of Armageddon; people would resist the Angels to prevent or stop Armageddon, and people would use the available scientific technology. The scientists of Gehirn created so-called ‘Evangelions’ (or short ‘Evas’) based on the biological material of the Angel – the scientists thought that Angel was Adam but in reality it was Lilith. In fact, the Evangelions (Evas) are piloted biorobots.

However, the Evas are not simple biorobots: they can be piloted only by special teenagers called in the series ‘Children’. This is the reference to classical mecha anime like ‘Mobile Suit Gundam’ (1979-1980) or ‘Ninja Senshi Tobikage’ (1985-1986) where the teenagers were sort of outlaws and representatives of a new phase of mankind evolution (they were called ‘Newtype’ in ‘Gandam’). But in ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ the teenagers are not the outlaws and Newtype; they have the mystical connection with the Evas. Thus, Yui Ikari, wife of Gendo Ikari, died in the process of testing Eva-01 – she tried to pilot Evangelion Unit 01 (Eva-01) but the biorobot killed her body but absorbed her soul; literally, the soul of Yui Ikari became the soul of Eva-01. And here we should pay attention to the game of words – shortening the form of the word ‘Evangelion’ to the form ‘Eva’ radically changes the meaning of the original word: ‘Evangelion’ that means ‘good message’ (‘good news’) becomes ‘Eva’ (Hebrew: “woman who gives life”) that has the strong reference to the Biblical Eva, the mother of all humanity. Thereby, Eva in the TV series also can be

considered as a mother. Mother has the strong connection with her child (or children) – in case of Eva-01 that possessed the soul of Yui Ikari this child is the son of Yui Ikari and Gendo Ikari – the Third Child Shinji Ikari. Only Shinji Ikari can pilot Eva-01. Metaphorically, when Shinji Ikari gets into the cockpit of the biorobot, he returns into his mother’s womb where the connection between mother and her child is strongest. Something like that can be said about the Second Child, Asuka Langley Soryu, whose mother, Soryu Kyoko Zeppelin, had gone mad and committed suicide after the testing of Evangelion Unit 02 (Eva-02); the soul of Soryu Kyoko Zeppelin is a part of Eva-02.

In ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ there are also three Children; the connection of two of them with Evangelion Units is bound with the Angels. The Fourth Child – Suzuhara Tohji doesn’t have the mother-child connection with Eva, which leads to the overcome of the Evangelion angelic essence over the pilot within Eva-03 and transform Eva-03 into the Angel. The Fifth Child, Nagisa Kaworu, turns out to be the Angel in reality. It is he who discovers that Nerv hides not Adam, but Lilith.

The First Child is Rei Ayanami. She is a clone of Yui Ikari (Ayanami is a maiden name of Yui) and a vessel for the soul of Lilith. Perhaps, that’s the reason why she chooses Shinji Ikari instead Gendo Ikari for initiation of the Third Impact: the mother-child connection usually is stronger than the wife-husband connection. The fact that Rei is the clone of Yui Ikari and the vessel of the soul of Lilith allows Ayanami piloting Eva-00 without any problems.

In ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ the cause of the Third Impact (i.e. Armageddon) is human beings. Officially Nerv is called up to protect mankind from the Adam’s Angels, but behind the organization of Nerv there are Gendo Ikari and the mysterious organization ‘Seele’ (Ger. ‘Soul’) who make plans how to begin the end of the world. The reasons of Gendo Ikari were mentioned earlier. The reasons of Seele are to unite souls of all living creatures on Earth into one living consciousness; Seele doesn’t want the uniting through the death in contradistinction to Gendo Ikari. The consideration of humanity as the cause of Armageddon in ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is in principle consistent with the Apocalypse of John, but there is a difference: in ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ the cause of Armageddon is a scientific curiosity of some humans, and in the Apocalypse of John the cause of Armageddon are sins of mankind. In a sense, ‘*Neon Genesis Evangelion*’ is a criticism of the extreme enthusiasm of mankind about science and technology, which actually is typical for warning science fiction.

Nevertheless, I think that the principal driver of the whole story of ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ is the following idea: “*We feel lonely because we are relying too much on the others’ opinions about us*”. Indeed, Gendo Ikari and

Seele aim at unite of all living creatures on Earth into something coherent whole as if they wish to overcome the need for relying on the others' opinions about us. Shinji Ikari obeys to others in order to win others (especially his father's) approval because he feels lonely. Asuka Langley Soryu wants to be the best pilot of Eva to win others approval because she feels lonely. Rei Ayanami wish to prove that she is not expendable but human being with real feelings. All this, probably, should say something about Japan, in which TV anime series 'Neon Genesis Evangelion' was created, namely *about the collectivism of the Japanese, which in the limit should be a coherent whole and reject all manifestations of individualism among the Japanese*. In the context of the above, it seems that creator of 'Neon Genesis Evangelion' Hideaki Anno opposes the collectivism of the Japanese and advocates the individualism – in the final of 'Neon Genesis Evangelion' Shinji Ikari refuses to merge with Rei Ayanami to create a coherent whole based on all living creatures on Earth, thereby giving each creature a chance.

Summing up what was said above, it is necessary to emphasize that 'Neon Genesis Evangelion' in all its variations is a specific mythology of the beginning and ending of life on Earth. The life on Earth began accidentally, and it was caused by the representatives of the dying extraterrestrial race (so-called 'First Ancestral Race'). The life on Earth can be ended by human beings due to the humans' scientific curiosity – their desire to know everything based on the feeling of loneliness and separation from something coherent whole (it's manifested in relying on someone else's opinion).

The mythology of 'Neon Genesis Evangelion' constitutes a postmodern theology which echoes mainly Judeo-Christians doctrines through the use of such words as 'Adam', 'Lilith', 'Eva', 'Evangelion', 'Angel', 'Spear of Longinus' et cetera; but, in fact, 'Neon Genesis Evangelion' turns out to be a criticism of the extreme enthusiasm of mankind about science and technology and the Japanese collectivism.

Костянтин Райхерт

ПОСТМОДЕРНІСТСЬКА ТЕОЛОГІЯ «NEON GENESIS EVANGELION» ЯК КРИТИКА

Аналізується японський анімаційний серіал «Neon Genesis Evangelion» у межах постмодерністської теології як культурного аналізу та культурної критики. Міфологія серіалу «Neon Genesis Evangelion» утворює постмодерністську теологію, яка передусім стикається з юдеохристиянськими віровченнями за допомоги вживання таких слів та словосполучень як «Адам», «Єва», «Євангеліє», «Ліліт», «Спис Лонгінія», «Янгол» тощо. Проте насправді серіал «Neon Genesis Evangelion»

виявляється критикою надмірного ентузіазму людей щодо науки та технологій, а також критикою японського колективізму.

Ключові слова: *аніме, апокаліпсис, генезис, критика, міфологія, постмодерн, теологія.*

Константин Райхерт

ПОСТМОДЕРНІСТСЬКА ТЕОЛОГІЯ «NEON GENESIS EVANGELION» КАК КРИТИКА

Анализируется японский анимационный сериал «Neon Genesis Evangelion» в рамках постмодернистской теологии как культурного анализа и культурной критики. Мифология сериала «Neon Genesis Evangelion» образует постмодернистскую теологию, которая прежде всего сталкивается с иудеохристианскими верованиями с помощью использования таких слов и словосочетаний как «Адам», «Ева», «Евангелие», «Лилит», «Копье Лонгиния», «Ангел» и др. Однако в действительности сериал «Neon Genesis Evangelion» оказывается критикой чрезмерного энтузиазма людей в отношении к науке и технологиям, а также критикой японского коллективизма.

Ключевые слова: *аниме, апокаліпсис, генезис, критика, міфологія, постмодерн, теологія.*

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ЛАУРЕАТИ КОНКУРСУ ПАМ'ЯТІ НЕЛЛІ ІВАНОВОЇ- ГЕОРГІЄВСЬКОЇ