DISENCHANTING THE END: SECULAR APOCALYPTIC VISIONS IN *20TH CENTURY BOYS*

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Abstract

Employing the concepts of disenchantment and secularism, this paper explores the depiction of apocalyptic scenarios in *20th Century Boys*, a Japanese dystopian manga written and illustrated by Naoki Urasawa. My argument is informed by the analysis of the manga offered by Jolyon Baraka Thomas in *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (2012). I shall argue that the story in *20th Century Boys* promotes secularist values with its emphasis on the necessity of disenchantment and the representation of science as a new secular savior for mankind. The first part of this article offers a synopsis of the story as well as the information regarding the author's background. In the following section, the definitions of apocalypse in various contexts are discussed. The analyses offered in the third section will revolve around the characterization of some characters in the manga. A close examination of these characters reveals that, despite their mythic roles, they can caution the readers against their own fascination with fatalistic and soteriological motifs commonly found in popular apocalyptic worldviews. In the fourth section of the article, I will mainly examine the thematization of science and technology in the manga in order to contend how they can embody secularist values.

Keywords: *20th Century Boys*; Naoki Urasawa; post-apocalypticism

Introduction

In "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)" published in *Diacritics* in 1984, Jacques Derrida, Catherine Porter, and Philip Lewis describe the nature of nuclear wars during his time as "fabulously textual." According to these scholors, nuclear wars were associated with textuality because they were operated merely on a textual and discursive level: "But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it". In fact, they may not have imagined that the textual production of apocalypses, regardless of its connection with nuclear wars, has become even more copious in the ensuing decades. A plethora of apocalyptic scenarios has been ceaselessly thematized in contemporary sci-fi films and science fiction, such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004), *The Road*, etc. Eschatological predictions can also be found in some subcultures such as the New Age movement or beliefs in the existence of aliens. In other words, the productions of the ends seem endless more than ever. Amidst the constellations of these apocalyptic texts, my paper will examine the theme of a Japanese manga series, *20th Century Boys*, one apocalyptic text which has been produced in response to the alarming popularity of a doomsday cult in Japan.

The manga was written and illustrated by Naoki Urasawa, whose works often explore both human psychology and social issues. Urasawa's works have earned him several awards and international acclaim. According to James Dorsey, *20th Century Boys* itself is also semi-autobiographical, reflecting the experience that Urasawa himself underwent during his early years. From the late 1960s to early 1970s, Urasawa witnessed both the rise and decline of an idealistic subculture led by a group of Japanese singers. This subcultural movement was ideologically motivated, and their collapse can still be considered a painful memory for the author's generation (Dorsey, 2011). This experience may have inspired the creation of *20th Century Boys* to a certain extent as the manga features both cultish organizations and charismatic leaders.

The manga tells a story of Kenji and his friends who try to save the world from a fiendish plot of a doomsday cult leader known as "Friend"

(*Tomodachi*). In the first chapter of the series, set in the late 1990s, the readers are introduced to Kenji, a middle-aged man and former rock musician who lives a humdrum life as a convenience store owner. In spite of his unsuccessful business, Kenji always remains positive, trying his best to take care of his mother and his infant niece, Kanna. One day, Kenji comes across Friend's doomsday cult, which prophesied the end of the world and the survival of the select few. Friend and his cult attract a large number of followers, including politicians, scientists, and high-ranking police officers. Little do these people know that the cult leader himself is the one who plans to destroy the world with deadly diseases and atomic bombs. Kenji learns the truth about the cult's connection with the deadly epidemic when one of the members of the cult decides to quit and search for Kenji, whom the cult members call "the prophet." It is later revealed that the reason Kenji is considered a "prophet" is because all the plans that Friend attempts to realize are based on Kenji's and his schoolmates' imaginations when they were young. Kenji's mission then is to gather all of his childhood friends in order to stop Friend, who turns out to be Kenji's schoolmates.[1] My analysis of the manga will focus on the secular aspect of the manga's apocalyptic narrative, arguing that the narrative exhibits its utmost secular quality in the way it enacts disenchantment and celebrates science as modern-day savior.

My reading of *20th Century Boys* is informed by the analysis offered by Jolyon Baraka Thomas, whose work explores the theme of the manga in relation to the rise of an actual doomsday cult in Japan: Aum Shinrikyo. Similar to Aum's members, Friend's followers in the manga are indoctrinated and devoted to their megalomaniac leader to the extent that they are willing to commit crime or kill anyone at Friend's request. Still, according to Thomas (2012), the similarity between Friend and Asahara Shoko, the leader of Aum, is not as important as the similarity between Friend and his protagonists. In *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan*, Thomas argues that the readers' fondness of charismatic protagonists is probably not different from strong admiration for the leader shared among Friend's followers and Aum members themselves. Thomas's reading is

[1] Throughout the story, there are two men who assume the role of Friend: Fukube and Katsumata. Both were Kenji's classmates.

framed by his speculation that Urasawa is too upset with his readers' failure to discern the cautionary message of his story, which warns them against the fascination with apocalyptic beliefs and messianic leaders:

> … Urasawa has publicly expressed frustration that fans have focused more on the mystery of Tomodachi's identity than on the point of his story, and I further surmise that Urasawa's frustration lies in his hope that his readership might pay attention to the tension created in the story by the very anonymity of the character. Because Tomodachi could be anyone, he could just as easily represent *everyone*. Urasawa's work thus undermines the common narrative tendency to use aberrant "cults" as foils for an apparently normal secular society. He draws his readers into the potentially disturbing recognition that their own attraction to Kenji, Kanna, and their cause (albeit fictional) may be frighteningly similar to the narratives created by groups like Aum Shinrikyo. (Thomas, 2012)

Thomas's reading and his remark about the parallel characterization between the protagonists and the villains provide an insightful criticism for the manga's relevance to Aum Shinrikyo. Nevertheless, the function of religious motifs in the story merits closer examination. The story of the manga can also be extended to a more general dichotomy of belief and unbelief. Through the lens of secularization theory, I shall contend that the author creates these messianic protagonists not merely to reveal to the readers their tendency for charismatic cult leaders as Thomas suggests but also to induce an experience of disenchantment by downplaying the grandiose religious significance of his own character as the story reaches its climax.

Religious and Secular Apocalypses

According to DiTommaso (2014), *apocalypticism* is "a worldview, a fundamental cognitive orientation that makes axiomatic claims about time, space, and human existence." This concept encompasses beliefs, lores, or ideas which revolve around predetermined terminal scenarios or apocalypses. Etymologically, *apocalypse* means "to uncover" or "to disclose" (Oxford

English Dictionary). In Christian tradition, this theologically charged term normally denotes the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, which, in spite of its annihilative nature, can be filled with optimism and hope for regeneration. After a cataclysmic event, a messiah will appear and save mankind. Those who lead their life in accordance with God's guidance will be rewarded, whereas those who do not will suffer punishment. These are general tropes in traditional apocalyptic narratives. Nevertheless, in general usage, the word *apocalypse* also includes a wide range of secular catastrophic scenarios which centers on "the belief in an approaching confrontation, cataclysmic event, or transformation of epochal proportion, about which a select few have forewarning so they can make appropriate preparations" (Landes, 2000). Apocalypses are no longer initiated by divine forces but rather caused by humans' ignorance or avarice (Oswalt, 2003). The secularized apocalypse, which can be caused by the misuse of science and technology, encapsulates the trepidation gripping humanity after the Second World War. As suggested by Schoepflin (2000), the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 have supplanted religious terminal scenarios and have unveiled an unnerving truth that an apocalypse can also be instigated by humans as opposed to divine agents. After the Second World War, dystopian and apocalyptic imaginations were for the first time based on calamities that had actually happened (Berger, 1999). Visions of man-made apocalypses have also invoked the technophobic temperament in the post-war culture. Having witnessed the destructive power of the atomic bombs, humanity continues to be plagued by the fear that our unscrupulous use of technologies can be conducive to the destruction of mankind (Dewey, 1990). Even though the distrust of technologies and scientific advancement already existed prior to the war, the atomic bombings as well as the Holocaust have played a substantial role in intensifying such anxiety, and the heightened fear of science and technologies has been repeatedly propagated in the post-war popular media as a result.[2]

[2] For more information, see Stephen O'Leary's (2000)

In addition to the difference in terms of cataclysmic agents, secular apocalypses, especially those found in popular beliefs, also differ greatly from their religious counterpart due to the absence of "spiritual transformation" for those who experience them (Bull, 1995). As a result, one may contend that secular doomsday can appear far more hopeless than religious ones. Daniel Wojcik, whose works explore the fatalistic temperaments in contemporary American folk beliefs, has pointed out and discussed the sense of despair secular apocalypses can induce. Although both secular and religious apocalyptic worldviews are often imbued with the sense of fatalism and inevitability, secular apocalypses do not always have any restorative or redemptive elements that can offer humanity solace or an affirming sense of order (Wojcik, 1997). The vision of a precarious world in which human civilization can be wiped out solely by one cataclysmic event while no divine mercy can be bestowed upon mankind can be distressing for many. Still, from a secularist perspective, this absence of divine agency also necessitates a more active role on humans' part. Since apocalypses can be human-induced, so are the solutions. Such secularist optimism may be less common in actual religious practices or millennial movements examined by Wojcik (1997), yet the modern propensity for such secular worldviews has inundated popular apocalyptic texts to a great extent.

Disenchanting Narrative and Desacralized Messiahs

In *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, Napier (2005) suggests that apocalypticism is deeply rooted in modern Japanese national identity due to its memories of the atomic bombings. Coupled with socio-economic transformation and impasses Japan has experienced and is experiencing, an apocalyptic identity may be something that Japanese people may want or long for. Such proclivity for apocalyptic thinking also resonates with Christopher Partridge's observation that eschatological narratives encourage "semiotic promiscuity" and help "re-enchant" the meaningless secular world for those who are dissatisfied with the secular interpretation of human history (Partridge, 2005). *Re-enchantment* in this context is the antithesis of *disenchantment*, which refers to the idea that science and rationality help dispel magic from the world. At first, the proliferation of

scientific knowledge made sociologists believe that human civilization would be moving toward total disenchantment of the world, yet nostalgia for the old world resurfaces after the disenchanted universe proves too barren and devoid of meaning for some. Myriad millennial movements or rises of occult subcultures in our time can be considered a manifestation of such a sentiment.

20th Century Boy captures well such feelings which romanticize more pregnant meaning of life. The protagonists are assigned grandiose roles as saviors for mankind while the narrative also evokes fatalistic sentiments. Kenji, for instance, has been transformed from an ordinary man to a heroic and larger-than-life warrior. His status as a "prophet" and his connection with Friend's plan also seem to suggest that he is not just randomly selected to play the role of a hero but is destined to be one. It should be stressed here that the roles of the main characters are not different from the roles of heroic agents in one of Aum's apocalyptic prophecies, which emphasizes that Aum members can save Japan from cataclysmic disasters by developing some supernatural powers.[3] However, toward the end of the story, the heroes are shown as both vulnerable and impotent. Such a plot undermines the mythic quality of the characters and thereby disenchant the readers, making them aware that faith both in a heroic person and in any powerful force must always be questioned.

As shown in the story, some characters possess or claim to possess supernatural powers. While biblical or religious motifs in popular apocalyptic fiction are usually regarded as a superficial and shallow artistic device to feed into the audience's immature longing for meaning and excitement (DiTommaso, 2014), Thomas's (2012) historicized interpretation of the manga suggests that this may not be the case with Urasawa's work. His use of religious symbolism helps dispel the readers' fascination with apotheosized characters. In Friend's case, it is clearly suggested in the story that his supernatural power is a bogus. This villainous character explicitly incarnates harmful blind faiths in religious figures. On the other hand, there are other characters on the good side who possess some genuine supernatural power as well. According to Thomas, these characters are by no means different from Friend. Their charisma may serve a cautionary purpose, reminding the readers of their predilection for cultish fascination. Moreover, Thomas also suggests

[3] For more information about Aum's teachings in popular media, see Richard Gardner (2008).

that the clichéd ending of the story in which Kenji assumes a heroic role and saves the world from Friend indicates the author's "(perhaps reluctant) acceptance of the fact that the audience desired an epic ending characterized by the aesthetics of extremity." For Thomas (2012), such an ending is marked by violence and the celebration of it, and the heroes eventually end up becoming more and more like the antagonists and those in real life whom Friend and his followers are modelled after. Acknowledging the validity of Thomas's insightful reading of the manga, my reading of the manga departs from Thomas in certain respect as I deem that the complexity of the ending needs to be disentangled more. Although the distinction between the hero and the antagonist may be rendered blurry, the ending of the story by no means indicates an authorial surrender to the affective demand of his readers. The ending of the manga in fact invites reevaluation and subverts the heroic quality of the characters.

In the case of Kanna, Kenji's niece, for instance, she does have an extra-sensory perception that helps her form an underground group to fight against Friend. According to the book of prophecy, she is also expected to play the role of the messiah, the "last hope" that can save mankind from destruction. However, as the story progresses, the plot development of the manga departs from the prediction in the book of prophecy. Eventually, Kanna does not succeed in doing anything substantial against Friend. While the narrative in the first arc of the story keeps reiterating Kanna's significant role, her actual contribution to the collapse of Friend's organization remains elusive throughout the story. She becomes upset and disoriented after realizing that Friend is actually her father. She manages to become the leader of an underground revolutionary movement and plans a riot against Friend's regime. However, her plan is purely suicidal. She knows that Friend's government is too powerful, and her followers could be killed, making her cancel the riot in the end. She also has an opportunity to meet Friend in person, but their confrontation is inconsequential to the fall of Friend's government. In short, Kanna's elevated status as the "last hope" within the narrative turns out to be as misleading as that of Friend. Their connection in fact can be a metaphor of how a clearly false belief can develop into a more realistic or more

relatable and ontologically appealing version of itself. Both however are equally harmful and illusory.

In a similar vein, Kenji is another epitome of a martyr figure who is stripped of the mythical quality. In his first attempt in 1999 to prevent Friend from destroying Tokyo with a giant bomb-equipped robot, Kenji gets caught up in the explosions and is presumed dead. Friend then frames Kenji as a terrorist and claims that Friend himself is the one who stops the bomb. This allows Friend to gain enough political power to control Japan, creating an Orwellian society in which everyone must worship him. Fifteen years after the bomb, however, Kenji shows up again. It is then revealed that, after the bomb, Kenji is injured and loses his memory. Once he regains his memory, he makes his return to settle the unfinished business with the new Friend.[4] The returning Kenji, now, does possess some surreal ability. He can captivate people and mobilize them to fight against Friend's officers simply by playing a rock song with his guitar. The surrealistic element of this episode enhances Kenji's status, likening him to a superhuman figure who possesses an indescribable power and a Christ-like figure after resurrection. In this respect, Thomas is certainly right when he argues that Kenji's portrayal can lure the readers into the kind of fascination followers of any cults may have toward their spiritual leader. Still, the point that I consider worth further elaboration is the fact that the author also eventually humanizes and undermines his own Christ-like protagonist in the last confrontation scene between Friend and Kenji. In this episode, the author provides his readers with a confessional flashback which reveals Friend's petty grudges against Kenji. When Kenji was young, he stole a toy badge from a local convenience store. Due to some confusion, the young Friend was held accountable for the loss of the stolen item. That incident caused Friend to be ostracized by his schoolmates. Later, in the climactic confrontation, in which Friend is about to use a remote control to activate the protonic bomb, Kenji, who at that point is aware of Friend's real identity, stops Friend not by defeating him physically but by making an apology for the crime he has done. After more than two-hundred chapters in which Kenji is

[4] Over the course of the story, there are two persons who assume the role of Friend. One is Fukube and another is Katsumata. By the time Kenji regains his memory, the original Friend (Fukube) has already been killed and replaced by Katsumata, who is also Kenji's and Fukube's schoolmate. Both Fukube and Katsumata harbor grudge against Kenji. Katsumata's identity remains unknown until the end of the story.

constantly presented as a heroic figure, the readers are given an abrupt confessional scene, revealing himself to be an ordinary man who is neither praiseworthy nor morally impeccable. It could be said the disenchantment with the fascination of messianic saviors in this episode also entails the disenchantment with the good-and-evil dualism, which is also relatively common in eschatological narratives.[5] Moreover, this backstory of the petty feud between Kenji and Friend exemplifies another facet of secular apocalyptic nightmares: an adverse catastrophe can result from a mere banal quotidian reality as opposed to a disastrous catalyst willed by a supernatural agent.

Not expecting Kenji's apology, Friend becomes lost and does not know what to do. Their confrontation then is interrupted by an assassin who disapproves of the new Friend. The assassin then kills Friend by crashing a helicopter into the stage on which the cult leader is standing. Given the turn of events in this scene, it is difficult to conclude from this climactic episode that Kenji, as a messianic character, does really save the world and fulfills the role of a savior by defeating the evil. If he does, he simply succeeds in doing so by making an apology, an anti-climactic gesture that departs greatly from conventional heroic exploits in other stories. As metaphorical as the relationship between Kanna and her father, Kenji's apologetic gesture to Friend reminds the readers of a complementary connection between a cataclysmic cause and apotheosis in relation to the desire for reenchantment. A savior is not born to stop a cataclysm. On the contrary, a cataclysm can be caused by a false savior or a desire to have and be saved by one.

Apart from the major characters, a minor character in the manga also plays a part in this disenchanting narrative. *God*, a homeless man who possesses omniscient foreknowledge, turns out to be a once wealthy businessman who destroys Kenji and his friends' Edenic playground when they were young. Despite his genuine foreknowledge, in one episode, God even admits that he does not really know the future. The author's treatment of this minor character here completely denies the readers any form of hope for a genuine magical agent. If the modern-day obsession with God-like

[5] See Partridge (2005) for more information about the appeal and common tropes in apocalyptic narratives.

superheroes reflects the unrealistic dissatisfaction with our own powerlessness as Saunders (2011) suggests, *20th Century Boys* demonstrates that such an escapist myth is something the readers should grow out of.

Humanity Wins: Science as a Secular Savior

Flashbacks from several incidents in Kenji's childhood show the readers that Kenji, while growing up, witnesses many historic events that mark the scientific progress in human history, including the successful mission of NASA to send Apollo 11 to the moon as well as the World Expo held in Osaka in 1970 with the theme "Progress and Humanity for Mankind." The historical references connote confidence in human potential and scientific advancements. This is another secular aspect of the manga story. Apart from downplaying the significance of the religiously loaded figures, the plot of *20th Century Boys* also replaces the messianic figures with science and technology as an alternative secular savior for mankind.

Even though modern scientific knowledge was a vital factor that led to the traumatizing atomic bombings during the Second World War, science has constituted a major part of modern life to the extent that it is impossible to live without reliance upon it. In the realm of popular media, as remarked by Susan Sontag, post-war sci-fi films, especially but not limited to Japanese films, often thematize the trauma of nuclear wars and looming threat nuclear weapons can pose to mankind, yet these films also feature stories that seek to "exorcise" this cultural trauma. In these films, science and technology often assume the role of a "great unifier" in these narratives (Sontag, 1996). Conrad Ostwalt (2003), whose works examine the depictions of apocalypses in contemporary Hollywood films, points out that secular apocalyptic films usually thematize human survival as opposed to capitulation to preordained fates while putting an emphasis on human ingenuity and ability to use science. The emphasis on science as a potential solution for apocalyptic threats disallows a teleological and fatalistic worldview by positing that the survival of mankind depends upon their own capacity to take control of the situation, not predicated upon divine mercy or guidance.

20th Century Boys is another example of sci-fi fiction in which science plays an important role in saving mankind. As later revealed in the story,

Kiriko, Kenji's sister and a bacteriologist, is the former lover of Friend. Oblivious to Friend's fiendish plan, Kiriko helps Friend create the fatal virus that plagues the world during the time before Friend rises to his power. However, after she realizes the true nature of her lover, she leaves him and goes to the U.S. where she dedicates herself to the research on the virus she has created. Toward the end of the story, Kiriko decides to put herself at serious risk by experimenting the vaccine she creates on herself. If the drug does not work, she will die within twenty-four hours after the injection of the vaccine. Fortunately, the medicine works, and, as Kiriko puts it, "humanity wins." This incident can underscore the ambivalent nature of science. While science can be destructive, it can also play the role of a redeemer too. Kiriko's success in discovering the cure against Friend's virus heralds the end of the fight between Friend and the protagonists. Friend may have been killed, but it is Kiriko's discovery that ensures his legacy will go away with him. Certainly, the readers may assign religiosity to this character due to her martyr-like self-sacrifice. After all, Kiriko herself is described by Friend's follower as the "Holy Mother," another religiously loaded description; nevertheless, it is worth noting that, in trying to find ways to save humanity, she decides to leave Kanna behind. Her success comes as she refuses to play the role in the apocalyptic narrative orchestrated by her husband. Her role as both potential destroyer and redeemer also reflects the double-edged nature of science rather than the morally simplistic religious apocalypse represented by the idolized characters, such as Kenji.

In addition, the ending of the story also suggests the status of technology as a possible redemptive medium. After Friend is defeated, Kenji goes back into the virtual reality world so as to apologize to Katsumata, the second Friend. The VR technology in the story is mainly used for indoctrination. Dorsey (2011) considers the representation of this technology as the reflection of the author's concerns about the misuse of technology among the younger generation: "The manga's ambivalence toward the potentials of the media reflects Japan's concern that this pillar of the Japanese economy (the game industry) might ultimately undermine its youth's ability to deal with the harsh realities of life." Nonetheless, the last chapter of the manga may reveal a less condemning view on the use of technology. After

Katsumata is killed in the helicopter crash in the earlier episode, Kenji decides to enter the virtual reality world in which his childhood is reenacted in order to a make an apology to his wrongly accused friend. This episode sheds light on a potential use of science in the modern era in which technology can be employed for emotional and arguably spiritual purposes. After all, Kenji's confession yields nothing but the redemption and closure for the protagonist himself. Evocative of Christian confession of sins, the virtual technology here serves as a medium providing both salvation and an access to the alternative world closely linked to the world of the physical. It may seem that the function of such a technology as a channel for spiritual fulfillment undermines the cautionary message against the longing for the spiritual; however, it is clear that the salvation for Kenji does not change the past. It offers solace merely on a psychological level. Rather than being a mere substitute for religious rituals, the VR technology in this episode reaffirms man's ability to make use of their own invention to defy all boundaries. Kenji's endeavor at the end suggests human's masterfulness in their use of technology for immaterial or non-corporal fulfillment.

Conclusion

20th Century Boys exhibits secularist values by altering some essential elements in traditional apocalyptic tropes. The messianic protagonist proves incompetent, unable to fully fulfill his role, while science and non-magical human capacity play a substantial role in putting an end to an apocalyptic calamity. Such disenchanting scenarios can be deemed a secularized version of eschatological narratives. Despite the precarious positions people may find themselves in, the story does celebrate secularism and the ability of humans to take control of their fate and do away with fatalistic divine forces. As shown in the last episode when Kenji enters a virtual world, Kenji gets a chance to meet his younger self, to whom he says, "Along the way, a lot things are gonna happen, but…live strong." The author ends his story with an optimistic yet realistic note, affirming the strength in living rather than grace given by a transcendent entity.

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