Posthumanism's Western Localization and non-Western Posthumanism in Anime. On Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*

Malte Frey[*]

Abstract

This paper is based on the posthuman aesthetic concepts Stefan Lorenz Sorgner describes in his recent book *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* (2022a). While Sorgner draws his arguments from Western philosophical tradition, as do critical posthumanism and transhumanism, two of his categories, the "super smooth" and *kawaii* (cute), do not derive from a Western cultural background, but from the Japanese one. However, concepts of the non-West do not necessarily entail the concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject which posthumanism and transhumanism try to deconstruct and surpass. The paper, thus, engages concepts of the Japanese cultural environment through the specific lens of anime, Japanese animation, and argues that the medium, too, can be regarded as a posthuman aesthetics. Borrowing from established anime scholars, I show how enactment of characters and spatial constructions in anime deviate from an anthropocentric perspective towards a relational one. The anime *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) is further employed to show that the religious/philosophical concepts of Buddhism and Shinto, though not being rooted within the deconstruction of the individual subject, in their relational ontologies can be aligned to posthuman thought as well. Therefrom, it is apparent that so conceived religion does not claim transcendence in the sense of Christianity. Rather, religious concepts are rooted within an immanent relational sphere.

Keywords: aesthetics, anime, Japanese philosophy, relational ontology, transcendence, posthumanism

[*] *University of Fine Arts Münster, Leonardo-Campus 2, 48149 Münster, Germany. E-mail: freymalte@gmail.com.*

1. Introduction

In his recent book, *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* (2022a), Stefan Lorenz Sorgner establishes ten "Aesthetic Concepts of Posthuman Artworks" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 61). These concepts include the bio-art of artists like Eduard Kac and also the body modifications of Orlan and Stellarc. Sorgner's endeavor clearly is to point out strategies in artistic practices that allow the blurring of boundaries of artist/audience, of subject/object and of the explicit dualist ontology that was and maybe still is so dominant in Western culture. I thereby include the philosophical traditions that pervade most of Europe and the US. This blurring of boundaries Sorgner aligns with the theories of critical posthumanism and the "posthuman turn" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 38) which breaks with and alters the previously dominant concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject with its dualist ontology of body (immanent) and mind (transcendence). However, Sorgner also mentions two aesthetic concepts that do not seem to derive from a Western cultural background: the "Aesthetics of Smoothness", which Sorgner develops on Hajime Soyarama's "Sexy Robot" (Sorgner, 2022a, pp. 85-86), and the "Aesthetics of Kawaii" (Sorgner, 2022a, 87-89), referring to artworks of Takahashi Murakami. Especially the latter is tied to and draws on the non-Western cultural environment of Japan. This is of particular interest as Sorgner builds his account of the *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* on the basis of a Western philosophical tradition, originating in the dualist ontology of Plato and Descartes. Whereas he is always blatantly clear in this regard, he still connects his philosophical findings to artworks and concepts not rooted within this Western tradition.

In this regard, this paper aims to take a look at non-Western perspectives through the lens of anime, that is animation based within the cultural environment of Japan. After briefly summarizing my perspective of Sorgner's theory of posthuman art, which I call the 'Western perspective', I will jump to non-Western perspectives. Following therefrom, I will show that the aesthetics of anime can, too, be regard as a from of "posthuman art". Further, entangling my Western background with non-Western thoughts allows to conceptualize religion without transcendence which I find similar to Sorgner's deconstruction of monotheistic Catholicism towards "an ethics of fictive autonomy based on love" (2022a, p. 59) in his book.

For the sake of clarification I want to stress that I neither aim nor is it within my capacity to give a detailed account of philosophical concepts of the non-West which concern posthuman theories. I here make use of my personal perspective, developing my dissertation on society structures depicted in postcyberpunk anime, and based on the concepts I encounter in doing so.

2. A Western Perspective

Following Sorgner, critical posthumanism can be connected to an academic discourse, built upon insights of Foucault, Deleuze and postmodernism in general, whereas transhumanism comes from a practical approach of the "Anglo-American evolutionary tradition" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 21).[1] Both movements, as heterogenous they may be, are involved with the premise of humanism, that is the concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject. Whereas critical posthumanism questions this concept and its implicit hierarchies in connection to the Western white heterogeneous male, transhumanism seems to prefer a more practical approach that not necessarily needs to deconstruct the humanist subject but can affirmatively build upon it.[2] Both movements, however, go beyond a dualist ontology dominant in Western culture with dichotomies "such as nature/culture, man/woman, subject/object, human/animal, or body/mind" (Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014, p. 8). In his book, Sorgner briefly summarizes the Western philosophical tradition from Plato over Cicero to Kant and then Nietzsche (Sorgner, 2022a, pp. 17-20). Critical posthumanism in particular deconstructs both notions of autonomy and of essence as the subject is thought of as relational, constantly changing. Depending on the contexts it finds itself in, it is "entangled" to borrow Karen Barad's (2015) term.

For Sorgner, "posthuman art" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 13) describes practices that blur established boundaries such as fixed identities and absolute notions of truth. It is for example the collapse of performer/audience and of subject/object in Jaime del Val's "metaformances" that Sorgner seems to hold constitutive in this regard (Sorgner, 2022a, pp. 25-26). Posthuman art is not and does not need to be autonomous, in contrast to what the philosophical tradition of the *Frankfurter Schule*, led by Adorno, famously proclaimed. For Adorno, taking on the Kantian notion "that art proper … is characterized by formal autonomy" (Zuidervaart, 2015), the autonomy of artworks is necessary to be withstanding in a hyper-capitalist society, leading to art being "the social antithesis of society" (Adorno, 2002, p. 8). An explicit dualist understanding of art is apparent when Adorno (2002, p. 6) speaks of art as the other in front of the subject, autonomously opposing the subject, and heterogeneously semantic in itself—the dualism of subject and object is apparent despite their interaction.[3] This Sorgner in particular criticizes as a concept "still stuck in a categorically dualistic ontology itself and [that] can

---

[1] Sorgner makes this distinction even more clearly and elaborately in his book on transhumanism (Sorgner, 2016/2020, pp. 50-55).

[2] For further reading I recommend Sorgner's book on transhumanism (Sorgner, 2016/2020) as well as the introduction of *Post- and Transhumanism* (Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014) co-authored. The *Posthumanist Studies Reader*, edited by Sampanikou and Stasieńko (2021), gives an excellent overview of theories normally summarized under the term of critical posthumanism.

[3] Interaction is a term based on the premise of at least two separately existing entities, as Barad (2003, p. 815) argues. The term 'interaction', this sense, is a reaffirmation of a dualist ontology.

therefore still be seen as a representative of the Platonic-Christian dualistic culture without realizing that this is the case" (Sorgner, 2022a, pp. 29-30). Posthuman artworks, on the other hand, "address a non-dualist ontology of permanent becoming" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 13). This further implicates a critique of an understanding of a universal truth: If something has an essence, is fixed and static in itself, it is an unchanging, everlasting truth which can be understood and acknowledged. This concept has become implausible and instead Sorgner claims perspectivism and pluralism (Sorgner, 2022a, pp. 46-49; 2016/2020, p. 40).

It is my understanding that this line of thought has had an immense impact on artistic practice in the last two decades and maybe even before. For that matter, it may be no coincidence that Donna Haraway, whose *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985/2016) I regard as still one of the most influential texts of posthuman theory, also has had an immense impact on the art world. For example, the German art magazine *Monopol* firstly included Haraway as the 31th most influential thinker/person in the art world in 2019 (Buhr et al., 2019, p. 60), as 4th in 2020 (Buhr et al., 2020, p. 37) and even as 1st in 2021 (Buhr er al., 2021, p. 64). Already in 2016, the Kunstverein Hamburg exhibited the show *Teeth, Gums, Machines, Future, Society (TGMFS)* by artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar. The installation featured passages of Haraway's manifesto printed on the floor and on large wooden panels which leaned on the wall and in front of the windows.[4] Additionally, all the artists that Sorgner builds his posthuman aesthetic categories upon can be considered both critically acclaimed and financially successful. Both posthuman theory as well as "posthuman art" appears to be well established within the contemporary art world. In this sense, I content that the twist away from Adorno's philosophy of art towards an aesthetics that is about blurring boundaries has already happened.

However, both critical posthumanism and Sorgner's critique on Adorno are based on the Western philosophical tradition, on the concept of an autonomous essence, whether that of an artwork or of a subject. This also applies for artistic practices, emphasizing the notion of fluid identity as exemplified by Haraway's cyborg, and thereby opposing the static characteristic of painting, photography and sculpture conceptualized by Western art critics and theorists. However, scholar Kumiko Sato (2004, p. 339) holds:

> Assuming that most of the non-West may not have formed the same model of the
> autonomous subject in the past at the level of theory and philosophy, … the notion of

---

[4] The exhibition was shown from September 24 until November 20 in 2016. Pictures and interviews regarding the exhibition and the included performances can be found in the catalogue which features the initial exhibition in Hamburg as well as later presentations of the show in 2017 in other places (Gortzak et al., 2018).

newness can only be seen as the West's luxury of critiquing itself on what the non-West has never enjoyed.

This, I argue, is a blind spot in critical posthumanism as well as in art theory. Sorgner's proclamation "to even increase plurality and diversity within the art world" (Sorgner, 2022a, p. 32) would well be supplemented by considering concepts different from Western philosophical tradition.

3.   (An)other Perspective(s)

During my study of fine arts, I spent half a year in Shanghai. Being influenced especially by North American art after the 1950s—Frank Stella, Ed Reinhard, Jeff Wall, Jasper Jones, Donald Judd, and many others—I explored museums and galleries in Shanghai and did not understand what I saw. I today would say that I did not even *see*. Rather, I would measure by my standards which were based on Western art history and extremely depending on the idea of a progressive discourse and, maybe, the overcoming of something, like Donald Judd and Frank Stella claiming the end of European painting in a radio interview conducted by Bruce Glaser in 1968. Accordingly, artworks in Shanghai occurred to me as dull and lacking the very progressive thinking I found my thrill in. It did take the better part of my staying there and numerous conversations with young artists in Shanghai to change that view. Finally, I understood that I had no means to really engage with those artworks since I could not place them in their context, lacking any background in the very long and rich history of Asian art in general and Chinese art in particular.[5] Perhaps, it is the same kind of intellectual arrogance Sorgner (2022a, pp. 13-14) accuses Adorno of that I, too, found myself guilty of and arguably still am guilty of at many times without even realizing it. Further, my behavior appears to be symptomatic for an intellectual arrogance of the West, willfully dismissing concepts alien to it. Sato's remark suggests that a similar attitude can be found in posthuman philosophy, dismissing notions of non-Western concepts or simply being oblivious to them.[6]

Enter Anime: As many scholars suggest, animated movies and series produced within the cultural environment of Japan can function as a global nexus for a multitude of concepts and cultures as they are produced within a Japanese cultural

---

[5] I am hereby not stating that I am an expert in European or American art history. Also, I am sure that there is a vast number of artists that would oppose the traditions I then concerned myself with.

[6] Another and maybe even worse Western perspective would be that of essentializing and generalizing non-Western cultural environments, making it out as a place of exotics and mystics as Edward Said has famously theorized. I do not wish to state that the West should go look for solutions or use other cultural environments as inspiration. I simply wish for a dialogue to happen to enrich the discourse.
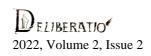
environment but globally receipted and present in daily life pop culture.[7] It is Japan's history of engagement with the West and its search for an identity (or many identities) facing the West which have led to numerous fictive narratives dealing with such interaction as Sato shows (2004). Following Takayuki Tatsumi, Japanese postwar identity can be understood as a "cyborgian identity" (2006, p. 6), mixed up out of and functioning as a nexus for many different concepts, negotiating the 'foreign' and the 'own'. The implicit proximity to posthuman philosophy, which also holds identity to be a fluid construction of many relational parts, may be regarded a "historical coincidence" as Tatsumi does according to Sato (2004, p. 346).[8] Within the scope of this paper, the immensely wide and difficult field of factors that played and continue to play a role in Western concepts becoming such an important factor in Japanese culture and fiction, even affecting notions of national identity, cannot be tackled. It must suffice to say that Japan, as a cultural environment after 1945, found itself pervaded by a multitude of influences from the Western world and also by concepts, thoughts and ideas concerning 'the essence of Japanese culture'—whatever that may be. Technology therein appears to be an important factor, both as a signifier for Western modernism as well as something that had to be implemented for Japan to be (internationally) successful.[9] Critical posthumanism as a concept of blurring boundaries can be used as a theoretical lens, especially as the blurring of human subject and technology is a frequent theme in Japanese sci-fi and not only there, to engage those thematics.

Anime, as maybe no other media, includes numerous narratives explicitly dealing with posthuman characters that are technologically altered as cyborgs as in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) or completely losing their human form as in *Akira* (1988), the coexistence of androids and humans as in *Appleseed* (2004) or the question of individualization in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1996–97). Anime, featuring specific styles and techniques whereby it can be differentiated from e.g. *Disney* and US-animation, is a global phenomenon. Its narrative often feature non-human

---

[7] For Susan J. Napier (2005, p. 22), "anime increasingly exists at a nexus point in global culture". The complicated interactions of the Japanese cultural environment with Western culture(s) often took place in Japanese fiction. Sato (2004, pp. 341-347) gives a good overview, regarding Japanese cyberpunk, how different concepts are incorporated and dealt with in fiction while also taking philosophical approaches of Kitaro Nishida into consideration. The Japanese philosopher argued for Japan to be a nexus, a locus of amalgamation, of own and Western concepts (Kasulis, 2018, pp. 463-477).

[8] Sato refers to Tatsumi's *Manifesto for Japanoid* (1993, translation Sato's). Since there is no translation of this work, Sato's statement cannot be verified. However, Tatsumi does talk about the incidental collision of US-cyberpunk fiction, which can be said to contain posthuman topics, with Japanese fiction and identity discourses (Tatsumi, 2006, pp. 105-111).

[9] For further reading regarding the economic rise of Japan in the twentieth century, I suggest Koizumi 2001 and Oshima 1982.

characters and thereby also implicitly deal with the posthuman. And it can be argued that it does so including also a non-Western background.

The critical reader might now accuse me of generalizing non-Western cultural environments by firstly referring to my experiences in China and now to Japanese anime. Of course, those are different cultures and societies and none of them can be regarded as homogenous. What I aim to highlight is my Western perspective which can be enlarged through entangling my thoughts with concepts rooted in different cultural environments. That being said, I strongly oppose any essentialist claims towards any cultural background as I understand culture, too, as something fluid and constantly changing. Anime, therefore, should not be understood as representing Japanese culture or philosophy. It is merely a medium whose fictions might contain concepts and aesthetics rooted in a cultural environment foreign to my Western background and thus worth to consider. I neither claim to be an expert in Japanese philosophy nor in posthuman aesthetics. I merely find myself entangled with them while watching and writing on anime.

4. Anime's Posthuman Aesthetics

Numerous Western scholars, mostly from the field of US-based Japan studies, like Susan J. Napier, Sharylin Orbaugh, Christopher Bolton and Steven T. Brown have considered posthumanist concepts within anime narratives. Brown (2010, p. 159) argues:

> Insofar as posthumanism is profoundly transnational, there is no Japanese posthumanism per se, if that is understood as a unified discourse of posthumanism that is specific to Japan alone; however, that is not to say that posthumanism does not come to be inflected in certain ways by the cultural forms and practices specific to Japanese visual culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This visual culture is especially visible in anime which are further receipted globally. While anime have often been approached through a lens that focuses on only the narrative, as Mari Nakamura (2017, pp. 83-86) attests for the works of Susan J. Napier, the media-specific aesthetics of anime are to be considered as well. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Sorgner refers to aesthetics rooted in the cultural environment of Japan. Especially, his argument on the *kawaii* seems of interest for my argument. *Kawaii* can roughly be translated as "cute" but, as Marco Pellitteri (2019) points out, it is massively embedded in contemporary Japanese culture and supersedes the implications of the English word "cute", but as well includes notions of femininity, adolescence, consumerist culture, and even functions as a supplement for the postmodernist lack a meaning in contemporary society. *Kawaii* is something that is mostly associated with big eyes, childlike features and cute characters like *Hello Kitty.* But it also comes with stereotypical

depictions of young people, especially girls in school uniforms, with cat ears or wearing clothes that remind of cute animals like the younger sister of the protagonist of the anime series *Rascal Does Not Dream of a Dreaming Girl* (2019) who, most of the times, appears in panda pajamas. As Pellitteri (2019, pp. 99-101) argues that *kawaii*-merchandize may provide a way to fill the otherwise conceived lack of "personal relationships" (p. 100), Sorgner also stresses that the *kawaii* seems to offer "relief from all the stress, worries and sorrows we all encounter on a regular basis" (2022a, p. 87). He further connects it to superficial playfulness which he holds opposed to the "aesthetics of authenticity, as it affirms a fictive aesthetics as a created form, which affirms a lightness of becoming" (2022a, pp. 89). This lightness of becoming seems to be a certain aesthetic choice because, as Sorgner previously states, it is "normally absent from our daily life world activities" (2022a, p. 88). *Kawaii* then appears to be an aesthetics which is not autonomous in itself, but functions as means to introduce a certain lightness to the unavoidable constantly changing of the world. In other parts of his book, Sorgner speaks of the necessity of "fictive autonomy" (2022a, p. 62) as he sees autonomy as something good, despite it not being grounded in an absolute notion of truth. For that matter, all aesthetics are fictive because, otherwise, there would be a 'true aesthetics', maybe referring to 'the beauty of nature' as did nineteenth century European romanticism. Aesthetics, in this regard, must always be understood as something 'fictive' as opposed to truth in the sense of a dualist ontology.

In this context, Sorgner refers to the so-called superflat paintings of Takashi Murakami which show bright colors, playful figures and an obvious lack of perspective depth in the sense of the Renaissance. Rather, cartoonish outlines and plain fields of color provide a sense of flat layering. This is a quality that can also be associated with anime. Media scholar Thomas Lamarre (2009, pp. 6-11), among others, argues that one of the characteristics of anime, in contrast to life-action movies, is that the camera is not moving but fixed on the so-called animation stand. Image layers of celluloid, stacked behind each other, invoke senses of movement and depth. It is the movement of planes rather than objects that constitutes the aesthetics of anime. Accordingly, the visual result is something that is rather 'flat' in contrast to the depth of spatially moving perspectives. And naturally, the aesthetics of *kawaii* can be found in anime as well for example as means to overcome the uncanny valley, to depict non-human actants as non-threatening as Japan scholar Jaqueline Berndt (2020, p. 408) points out in her article *Anime's Situated Posthumanism* in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*.

The aesthetics of anime, what Stevie Suan has called the "anime-esque" (Suan, 2021, p. 17), is one that further allows for media specific performances of the posthuman subject. Suan proposes that from the way characters are performed in anime follows a different concept of selfhood which opposes that of the

autonomous-essentialist subject. Referring to Azuma's *Otaku. Japan's Database Animals* (2009), Suan claims that in anime certain visual codes like for example "arched eyes for happiness and glimmering eyes for overflowing emotion" (2021, p. 213) are used and reiterated in performing characters. Contrarily, in Disney's animation, human actors often function as models for the animation as did actress Mary Kelly for Tinkerbell in Disney's 1953 movie *Peter Pan*. Characters in anime, however, do not refer to individuality and unity of the physical human subject, the actor or actress, but the character in anime is created through particularly used codes, which is why Suan coins the term "particular-characters" (2021, p. 228). Such create a different concept of selfhood, namely one that is rather relational than the concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject to which Suan refers to as the "bordered-whole" (2020, p. 21). Anime's media-specific qualities then can be regarded as connected to the Western theories of critical posthumanism insofar as it gives way for an aesthetics that is not rooted in the Anthropocene. It is rather the flatness and the media specific codes that give rise to the characters that, therefore, blur the boundaries of human and non-human. This tackles also the question of representation. I suggest that anime, in this regard, may be seen as rather creation of worlds than representation of the supposed real. In this regard, Berndt (2020, p. 407) states:

> Anything but confined to the visual dimension, im/mobility, and dis/continuity go right to the heart of anime 's media affordance for posthumanism. … commercial TV anime has turned technical and economic constraints into a recognizable style, its (by now deliberate) imperfection corresponding with character types that escape the modern anthropocentric standard.

That anime plays an important role regarding posthumanism is further apparent in Saito's article on anime in the *Routlege Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (Saito, 2020). Therein, Saito highlights the multitude of female cyborg characters in Japanese cyberpunk anime which would tackle the topics of "the posthuman identity that transcends boundaries of gender, race, and humanity, they simultaneously reinvent the pleasure of owning the power of the female body" (Saito, 2020, p. 155). Saito obviously appears to have in mind Mamoru Oshii's extremely famous cyberpunk anime *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) which leads me to my next point.

5. Religion without Transcendence

Ghost in the Shell, like maybe no other anime, has led to considerations by a vast number of scholars, inspired the Wachowski sisters for their *Matrix* films (Iles, 2008, p. 165) and is followed by a still ongoing franchise featuring numerous movies and series. Nearly thirty years after its first screening and the global and

especially critical success later, *Ghost in the Shell* still can be employed as a ground for philosophical reflections, especially such considering posthuman concepts.

The movie is about collapsing borders and the insecurity thereby invoked. Motoko Kusanagi is a cyborg and her understanding of her identity is depended on various features of her mechanical body. Some of those belong to the government organization she works for and she would lose them if she quit. She is plagued by the question *What is my essence?* Or, as the film puts it, what is her *ghost?*

This search for catharsis is accompanied by references to both Christian traditions as well as to notions of Shinto and maybe Buddhism (Ruh, 2004, pp. 134-137). Director Mamoru Oshii at one time considered joining the Christian seminary (Ruh, 2004, p. 9). Additionally, his first feature length anime, *Angel's Egg* (1985), has been read through the lens of Christian concepts (Ruh, 2004, pp. 45-60). In *Ghost in the Shell,* there seems to be a borderless heteroglossia of religious references which seems to be in line with Oshii's statement that anime can function as a stateless locus of fusion (Napier, 2005, p. 25) Within the scope of this paper, it is impossible to give a detailed account of religious references in *Ghost in the Shell.* However, since Sorgner also presents his thoughts on theology regarding the posthuman turn away from the autonomous-essentialist subject, the numerous religiously connoted references in the non-Western movie *Ghost in the Shell,* which is a movie obviously dealing with posthumanist topics, can function as a critical frame to consider Sorgner's Western argument.

Christianity is naturally connected to the ideal of the autonomous-essentialist subject and the idea of universal and absolute truth. Gianni Vattimo's postmodern philosophy of weak thought allows for twisting such notions of universality which, in the case of Catholicism, leads to an "ethics of autonomy based on love" Sorgner argues (2022a, p. 59). One might say, in focusing on practical ethics, Vattimo abandons the transcendence that has been one of the most defining aspects of Western religion, especially Christianity. As transcendence, opposed to immanence, is a concept inherent to dualist thinking, it is tied to the humanist concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject. It is the human essence, the core, the soul, whatever you name it, that is believed to be able to transcend the immanent plane. Christianity in particular, and Western tradition in general, therein stress the importance of the individual subject that is independent from its surroundings. Believes and concepts of Buddhism and Shinto, however, do not. Timothy Iles (2008) argues that posthumanism's aim to view "the world as 'one system'" (Iles, 2008, p. 172), meaning that posthumanism abandons a radical dualism of mind and physical body and puts emphasis on the posthuman subject as "embedded and embodied" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 24) within the world, is nothing new within the cultural environment of Japan but "a point of view at least 2,500 years old, as expressed in Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, from India and China, respectively.

It is also a point of view which many Japanese philosophers… have held …" (Iles, 2008, p. 172). Firstly, Buddhism sees the fundamental "interconnectedness of all things, material and immaterial" (Iles, 2008, p. 173) which is why, in Buddhism, identity cannot be conceived as something independent from the surrounding context (Iles, 2008, p. 174; Kasulis, 2018, p. 84). This notion can be linked to the posthuman notion of relational models of identity. Secondly, Shinto likewise diverts from anthropocentrism since it recognizes *kami,* Japanese for gods, who are not separated from the material world but the material world is interconnected with them and they live together with humanity (Iles, 2008, p. 178). Thomas P. Kasulis (2018, p. 53) contents regarding the Shinto belief in *kami*:

> The ancient Japanese … did not sharply distinguish matter and spirit as western thinking has so frequently done since Plato. … Nature and humanity, matter and spirit, or the divine and human are so intimately related that to isolate them into independently existing entities would destroy part of their fundamental character.
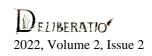
Buddhism and Shinto, which is a field of religious practices originated in Japan, align in many ways which is why one cannot always make a clear-cut distinction. Aike P. Rots (2017, pp. 29-34) argues that religion as a concept only emerged in Japan after the country had forcefully been opened to Western influences. Only thereby, the distinction between Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity was possible since religion, as a concept, stems from a Western context and was not used in Japan prior to its introduction in the late nineteenth century (Shimada, 2000, pp. 137-50). In any case, it seems safe to say that traditions of Shinto and Buddhism, both of which strongly oppose the anthropocentric claim and further propagate relational concepts of selfhood, are much more deeply established within the cultural environment of Japan than the concept of the individual autonomous-essentialist self, which only came to Japan through the West (Shimada, 2000, p. 77). It seems interesting in this regard that, in 1884, Japanese historian Nagao Ariga links the concept of individuality to Christianity, in contrast understanding the Japanese society as based on collectivity (Shimada, 2000, pp. 54-55). Further, the notion of the unity of mind/spirit and body within the *Leib* is upheld by a many Japanese philosophical positions. While a distinction seems possible, it never amounts to an ontological difference (Steineck, 2014). This seems also in line with Buddhism and Shinto which both proclaim an ongoing interrelatedness.

For that matter, Tetsuro Watsuji, a Japanese philosopher of the early twentieth century, criticizes Heidegger's *Time and Being* (1927) for its disregard of space. Watsuji, like Heidegger, opposes the dualism of subject and object, of a mind independent form its physical body and surroundings (Watsuji, 1992; Kasulis, 2018, pp. 487-492) and stresses spatiality an important factor of human existence. It is not only time we find ourselves in, but it is specifically time *and* space that

shapes our existence, our very being. And only through being *within* time and space the distinction of world and self seems possible. Therefore, Watsuji holds the in-between as the primary ontological basis. In posthuman theory, philosopher and physicist Karen Barad (2003), too, claims phenomena, within which things through "intra-actions" (2003, p. 801) become determinate, as the primary ontological basis. Barad shows that things in themselves are not the primary ontologically unit but that things only become determinate things in relational processes, intra-actions, which is why she regards the process of relation as the basis for any distinctions. Watsuji, roughly a hundred years before, seems to have had a very similar thought like Barad's posthuman concept. This is why I do not wonder to find Watsuji's concept applied in an analysis of *Ghost in the Shell* in sci-fi author Nelson Rolon's (2013, pp. 32-33, 56) bachelor thesis on posthumanism in the anime.

All of the above mentioned concepts do not account for a notion of transcendence as absolute truth but rather put emphasis on the interrelatedness within the immanent world. This seems in line with also Sorgner's argument borrowed from Vattimo regarding the twist of Christianity towards an ethics of love. In the aesthetics of anime, interrelatedness, rather than embodied individuality, posthumanly lays the ground for the characters' selfhood. The religious heteroglossia in *Ghost in the Shell* suggests a similar conceptualization.

Taking those only briefly introduced examples of concepts of non-Western cultural environments into consideration, still bearing the risk of oversimplification, *Ghost in the Shell* at a first glimpse appears to tackle the conflict between the notion of the autonomous-essentialist subject, linked to the dualist ontology of Christianity, and the relational ontology of Buddhism and Shinto in the theme of the protagonist Kusanagis's existential crisis. However, whereas as Sorgner seems to proclaim the posthuman notion of pluralist perspectives, the movie appears to draw a different conclusion. I argue that the transhumanist enhancement of Kusanagi—she has superhuman strength, speed and can access the net via her cyber-brain—ultimately amounts to a growth of thereby established socio-economic relations, further questioning her sense of selfhood as an autonomous-essentialist subject since she finds herself restricted and confined by those relations. In this sense, transhumanist practices of enhancement appear to result in a posthumanist deconstruction of the identity model of the autonomous-essentialist subject, at least within the capitalist society depicted in the anime. Whereas posthumanism's plurality is seen by Sorgner as something positive which one should strive for, in *Ghost in the Shell,* the collapse of Kusanagi's sense of autonomy and essence, caused by transhumanist enhancement, is depicted as a crisis which ultimately can only be resolved by her identity being 'twisted' through her merger with the technological life form Puppetmaster at the end of the movie.

However, the film's ending suggests that the outcome of that merger is an identity that has eluded the previously mentioned socio-economic dependencies and is now (again) an independent self, an autonomous-essentialist subject.

The element of catharsis and even salvation is a strong metaphor in this context and emphasizes a Christian background, evident by visual references to a halo and angels as well as the biblical reference to I Corinthians 13, which have been pointed out by Brian Ruh (2004, pp. 136-137) and William O. Gardner (2009, pp. 51-52), among others. I assume this is one of the many reason why theologian Rainer Gottschalg employs the movie as a "theological-anthropological locus of discourse" (Gottschalg, 2018, p. 234, translation mine). However, in *Ghost in the Shell*, there seems to be a need for transcendence to tackle the insecurity caused by growing interrelatedness. Ever changing, depending on a multitude of relations, is felt as just too much. This affirms Sorgner's assertion that transhumanist endeavors may prolong the human health span but cannot provide a meaning for *life* (Sorgner, 2022b, p. 183). Oshii's anime is looking for such meaning to be found within the realm of transcendence. Such transcendence, on the other hand, is depicted as rooted again within the very physical world as the merger of Kusanagi and Puppetmaster appears to take place within her cyber brain which is finally set in a child's body. Kusanagi/Puppetmaster, now a childlike figure, still walks the earth, still is immanent to New Harbor city which she finally overlooks and the end of the movie.

Berndt refers to Japanese media scholar Naoya Fujita who sees "the Japanese discourse … characterized by an absence of euphoric transhumanism as an attempt to overcome death" (Berndt, 2020, p. 412). Sorgner never fails to point out that transhumanism's aim is not to overcome death but to extent the health span of an individual (Sorgner, 2016/2020, pp. 1-2; 2022b, pp. 6-21) and that gaining immortality in the strong sense of the word is not an realistic option. Another perspective is that of theologian Elaine L. Graham who sees transhumanism's strive for technological progression and its application to the human subject as a form of "Religion of Technology" (2002, p. 155) led by a "will for transcendence" (p. 165). To Graham, the cyberspace then is a sacred space that allows for superseding the limits of the flesh (Graham, 2002, pp. 169, 172, 231). Graham's position can be regarded as the typical understanding of transhumanism's uncritical attitude towards the human subject and overall techno-euphoria. The absence of such an attitude in anime, or maybe in the cultural environment of Japan in general, seems more in line with Sorgner's argument that enhancement cannot provide meaning.

Further, on the other hand, in *Ghost in the Shell,* increasing plurality, caused by no less than technological enhancement which causes the blurring of previously set boundaries—a positive developed not only within the arts but in general according to Sorgner—is perceived as a threat, as a crisis that necessitates

reassurance of the self's essence which is, again, provided by technology in the form of the technological life form Puppetmaster. Now we appear to have come full circle: transhumanist enhancement leads to posthumanist deconstruction of the autonomous-essentialist subject, which is negatively connoted, but salvation from such crisis of the individual is, nonetheless, offered by the technological life form Puppetmaster, who, however, has already eluded human control. Can it then be seen as techno-optimism if technological salvation cannot be intended but is granted, very much alike to religious revelation? But Puppetmaster is no representative of a transcendent realm but immanent to the physical world. Consequently, *Ghost in the Shell* seems to prefer relational entanglement that supersedes the set boundaries of the autonomous-essentialist subject on an immanent plane over simply longing towards a transcendence. Kusanagi/Puppetmaster stays.

Probably referring to his teacher's, Gianni Vattimo (1989), concept of the *Verwindung* (twist) rather than *Überwindung* (overcoming), Sorgner throughout his book repeatedly speaks of a twist that occurs in posthuman concepts. Explicitly referring to Vattimo's line of thought, Sorgner (2022a, pp. 56-59) strips (Christian) religion of transcendence and reduces it to an ethics. It is a process of weakening notions of absolute truth. Despite all of its religious references, *Ghost in the Shell* actually never even implies a transcendent sphere that is completely severed from the immanent world. The concept of salvation, offered in *Ghost in the Shell*, in this sense, extremely differs from the Christian concept rooted in a dualist ontology. For that matter, it gives way to the more relational concepts of Shinto and Buddhism, notwithstanding posthuman concepts of relational identities.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that critical posthumanism and also Stephan Lorenz Sorgner's *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* (2022a) is based on the Western tradition of a dualist ontological, including the concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject. The deconstruction of such notions is also argued within a specifically Western framework which, whether willfully or obliviously, neglects concepts of non-Western cultural environments. Because of my work concerning anime, and because Sorgner offers the concept of *kawaii* as a posthuman aesthetics in his book, I have provided examples of concepts within the Japanese cultural environment that seem to be aligning with posthumanist thought while not deriving form it. Anime aesthetics exhibit forms of character performances that oppose concept of the autonomous-essentialist concept. In this sense, anime aesthetics may be regarded as a from of posthuman aesthetics or posthuman art. Further, notions of Buddhism and Shinto are therein included as well as the philosophical theories of

Tetsuro Watsuji, all of which apparently proclaim relational ontologies over fixed identity-concepts. I have employed Mamoru Oshii's cyberpunk classic anime *Ghost in the Shell* as a nexus for concepts of Western Christianity and the relational ontologies of Shinto and Buddhism. Additionally, as Sorgner claims with Vattimo that the posthuman turn causes religion, especially Catholicism, to back away from transcendence, *Ghost in the Shell* also suggests interrelatedness within an immanent plane rather than transcendence. Crisis of the autonomous-essentialist subject is not resolved through salvation by transcendence but through interaction and changing. In this sense, religion without transcendence seems possible and is already realized in the relational ontologies of Shinto and Buddhism which only have been superficially touched within this paper. With those brief considerations, I urge all theorists concerning themselves with posthuman thought to further break also the border of Western philosophy tradition. After all, the blurring of boundaries and disclosing them as historically grown constructs is the very core fundament of critical posthuman theory.

References

Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Aesthetic Theory*. G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann (Eds.). Continuum.

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter. *Signs*, *28*(3), 801–831.

Barad, K. (2015). *Verschränkungen*. Merve Verlag.

Berndt, J. (2020). Anime's Situated Posthumanism. Representation, Mediality, Performance. In M. Rosendahl Thomsen & J. Warmberg (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism* (pp. 403–414). Bloomsbury.

Braidotti, R. (2018). Posthuman Critical Theory. In R. Braidotti & M. Hlavajova (Eds.), *The Posthuman Glossary* (pp. 13–32). Bloomsbury.

Brown, S. T. (2010). *Tokyo Cyberpunk. Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Buhr, E., Frenzel, S., Hohmann, S., Trebing, S., & Völzke, D. (2019). Top 100. Wer regiert die Kunstwelt? Das jährliche Monopol Ranking der 100 einflussreichsten Protagonisten des Kunstbetriebs. *Monopol*, 12, 40–74.

Buhr, E., Hinrichsen, J., Hohmann, S., Stiegemann, C., Trebing, S., & Völzke, D. (2020). Top 100. Wer regiert die Kunstwelt? Das jährliche Monopol Ranking der 100 einflussreichsten Protagonisten des Kunstbetriebs. *Monopol*, 12, 32–60.

Buhr, E., Frenzel, S., Hinrichsen, J., Hohmann, S., Trebing, S., & Völzke, D. (2021). Top 100. Wer regiert die Kunstwelt, wer hat 2021 besonders geprägt? Das jährliche Monopol Ranking der 100 einflussreichsten Protagonisten des Kunstbetriebs. *Monopol*, 12, 62–88.

Gardner, W. O. (2009). The Cyber Sublime and the Virtual Mirror. Information and Media in the Works of Oshii Mamoru and Kon Satoshi. *Revue Canadienne d'Études Cinématographiques/Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, *18*(1), 44–70.

Glaser, B. (1968). Questions to Stella and Judd. In G. Battock (Ed.), *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology* (pp. 148–164). Dutton & Co, Inc.

Gortzak, R., Steinbrügge, B., & Ragaglia, L. (Eds.). (2018). *Lili Reynaud-Dewar. Theeth, Gums, Machines, Future, Society*. Hatje Cantz Verlag GmbH.

Gottschalg, R. (2018). Digitalisierung und "Post-Schöpfung" in GHOST IN THE SHELL (1995). Der japanische Animationsfilm: ein (theologisch-)anthropologischer Diskursort. In T. Heimerl & C. Wessely (Eds.), *Weltentwürfe im Comic/Film. Mensch, Gesellschaft, Religion* (pp. 215–235). Schüren Verlag GmbH.

Graham, E. L. (2002). *Representations of the Post/Human. Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*. Rutgers University Press.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, And Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Minnesota Press.(Original work published 1985)

Iles, T. (2008). *The Crisis of Identity in Contemporary Japanese Film. Personal, Cultural, National*. Brill.

Kasulis, T. P. (2018). *Engaging Japanese Philosophy. A Short History*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Koizumi, K. (2001, January). In Search of "Wakon". The Cultural Dynamics of the Rise of Manufacturing Technology in Postwar Japan. *Technology and Culture*, *43*(1), 29–49.

Lamarre, T. (2009). *Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. University of Minnesota Press.

Nakamura, M. (2017). *Emancipation in Postmodernity: Political Thought in Japanese Science Fiction Animation* [Dissertation in Humanities]. Leiden University.

Napier, S. J. (2005). *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle. Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Oshii, M. (1995). *Ghost in the Shell* [film]. Panini Videos.

Oshima, H. T. (1982, October). Reinterpreing Japan's Postwar Growth. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *31*(1), 1–43.

Pellitteri, M. (2019). Kawaii Aesthetics from Japan to Europe. Theory of the Japanese "Cute" and Transcultural Adoption of Its Styles in Italian and French Comics Production and Commodified Culture Goods. In M. Hernández-Pérez (Ed.), *Japanese Media Cultures in Japan and Abroad. Transnational Consumption of Manga, Anime, and Media-Mixes* (pp. 94–114). MDPI.

Ranisch, R., & Sorgner, S. L. (2014). Introducing Post- and Transhumanism. In R. Ranisch & S. L. Sorgner (Eds.), *Trans- and Posthumanism. An Introduction* (Vol. 1, pp. 7–16). Peter Lang GmbH.

Rolon, N. (2013). *Establishing a Post-human Identity through Mamoru Oshii's Ghost in the Shell and Innocence Films* [bachelor thesis, Purchase College, State University of New York].

Rots, A. P. (2017). *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan. Making Sacred Forests*. Bloomsbury.

Ruh, B. (2004). *Stray Dog of Anime. The Films of Mamoru Oshii*. Palcgrave MacMillan.

Sato, K. (2004). How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context. *Comparative Literature Studies*, *41*(3).

Saito, K. (2020). Anime. In A. McFarlane, G. J. Murphy, & L. Schmeick (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (pp. 151–161). Routledge.

Sampanikou, E. D., & Stasieńko, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Posthuman Studies Reader. Core Readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (Vol. 2). Schwabe Verlag.

Shimada, S. (2000). *Die Erfindung Japans. Kulturelle Wechselwirkung und Nationale Identitätskonstruktion*. Campus Verlag.

Sorgner, S. L. (2020). *On Transhumanism: The Most Dangerous Idea in the World?!* (S. Hawkins, Trans). Pennsylvania State University Press. (Original work published 2016).

Sorgner, S. L. (2022a). *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*. Schwabe Verlag.

Sorgner, S. L. (2022b). *We Have Always Been Cyborgs. Digital Data, Gene, Technologies, and an Ethics of Transhumanism*. Bristol University Press.

Steineck, R. C. (2014). Grenzziehung: Überlegungen zu Leib und Körper in der neueren japanischen Philosophie. In R. C. Steineck, E. L. Lange, & P. Kaufmann (Eds.), *Bergriff und Bild der modernen japanischen Philosophie* (pp. 317–338). Fromman-Holzboog Verlag.

Suan, S. (2021). *Anime's Identity. Perfomativity and Form beyond Japan*. Minnesota Press.

Watsuji, T. (1992). *Fūdo – Wind und Erde. Der Zusammenhang zwischen Klima und Kultur* (D. Firscher-Barnicol & R. Okichi, Trans.). Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Zuidervaart, L. (2015). Theodor W. Adorno. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/adorno/#4

Vattimo, G. (1988). *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. The John Hopkins University Press.