Exegesis and Authorial Agency through Judeo-Christian Iconography in Japanese anime: Neon Genesis Evangelion (1995-97) as an Open Work

Abstract

Exegesis is a common practice when discussing religious texts. It has also been employed in the analysis of cultural production to elucidate the author's intentions. Japanese animation (anime) is a transnational industry with cases such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1997), in which the figure of an individual author, in this case the filmmaker Hideaki Anno, interacts with the collaborative authorship by the rest of the production team. The extensive use of obscure Judeo-Christian terminology and iconography in this work has risen debate about the actual intentions of Japanese author(s) when referring to Western culture. Our analysis concludes that the use of this iconography is intentional. The ambiguity of the narrative, shaped using multiple obscure references, aims to induce in the viewer the feeling of a complex text. This would reinforce the previous considerations of this anime as an "open work", in the sense defined by post-structural semiotic analysis.

1. Open works and exegesis of transnational products

Exegesis is a heterogeneous practice traditionally linked to the interpretation of religious texts, in particular the Bible. It is commonly applied to Media Studies, either as metaphor when referring to the interpretation of religious narratives, or as close-readings of complex texts, which is ultimately guided by objectivity and rational discussion. In this context, exegesis is often supported with reflective authorial accounts in the form of auto-ethnographies, practice-led research and cinema essays (Kroll, 1999; Bordwell, 1991, p.19), to reinforce the validity of authorial arguments and unique interpretations.

Media Studies, and in particular those focused on cinema, participate in the long tradition of the use of Semiotics as a tool of analysis (Eco, 1977; Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). However, Semiotics tend to be seen as a complement to other textual and content analysis techniques rather than as a core method. Umberto Eco (1977) highlighted the reflexivity of these tradition and its complexity by questioning if Semiotics should be regarded as a tool for film analysis or, on the contrary, films should rather be considered a path to understanding the Semiotics science instead. Following a similar reasoning, we argue that exegesis can be a tool for Media Studies as well as an object of study, which can be reached through many methodologies; for example, through cinematographic analysis, semiotics or, in this case, the study of religious iconography.

Acknowledging authorship agency is a core part for our analysis and a necessary condition for the existence of a Media text exegesis. Cultural texts are arguably complex, and meaning is constructed through the interaction of signifiers and the signified. If exegesis can lead to a univocal meaning and be a consequence of deductive reasoning, it is only because of the existence of an author.

In this regard, it is important to clarify which forms can adopt authorship in the context of an artistic work as well as in Media Studies. We would avoid debate on ontological

questions: that is, the existence of an author as an individual or a collective identity. Instead, we will follow the interpretive advantages of this construct, using auteur-structuralism for the analysis of works of art (Thomson-Jones, 2008, p. 51). By doing this we are not denying the active role of audiences in the interpretation of texts, but rather pointing out the prevalence of intentionality that may or may not correspond to a single individual, multiple or even collective authorship.

Authors are intended to produce 'conclusive' forms, but each member of the audience will have a subjective approach to the material. Hall employed Habermas' term of 'systematically distorted communication' (Habermas, 1970) to explain how the transmission of a message is translated by audiences in a process that encompasses both encoding and decoding (1973, p.1). Audience intentions and personal circumstances will always filter the access to the message's original meaning, which explains why all works of art could be understood as 'open works' (Eco & Robey, 1989, p. 19).

Japanese TV animation (anime) represents an unusual case of authorship which impacts in any exegesis. Like any large media industry, anime is based on different models of professional collaboration. As it is the case in other media, the role of some authors is internationally recognized and has important consequences on a work's distribution and its popularity can contribute substantially to the critical and commercial success of the product. However, when comparing Japanese animators focused on cinema such as Hayao Miyazaki or Makoto Shinkai, the work of reputed TV directors such as Hideaki Anno or Shinichirō Watanabe becomes less popular and somehow specific of fan audiences.

While TV anime has been well defined in terms of style and narrative as a serial form (Berndt, 2018, pp. 8-11), it is important to acknowledge that it also is an industry with great thematic and stylistic diversity, mainly defined by the transnational and transmedia nature of its products (Hernández-Pérez, 2019). Manga and anime authors are keen explorers of cultures and geographical settings from all around the world. They collect influences are a way of expanding the thematic diversity of their productions, inspiring characters, plots and even vocabulary. This trend was conceptualized, coinciding with the boom of these markets in the early 2000s, as a strategy toward transnationalisation and hybridization of Japanese global culture. In this manner, Japanese authors build a more attractive image for Western audiences, in which traditional forms derived from native visual culture alternate with Western themes and the reimagining of a modern and technological Asia, led by Japan (Iwabuchi, 1998). However, the search of a certain exoticism to appeal native audiences are also achieved through the *transculturalization* of Western iconographic traditions, and sometimes lay behind these more obvious ideological readings.

Our research will examine the practice of exegesis and the use of religious iconography in the context of transnational products. This will be done by resorting to the semiotic and narrative analysis of the most relevant, international, and, arguably, one of the most influential anime series ever produced: *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (referred as NGE from now on).

This choice is based on two closely related features. In first place, its recognized status as an author's product embedded in the filmmaker's figure of Hideaki Anno (Napier, 2002: 428; Azuma, 2016), although we will also discuss readings in relation to collective authorship, being Gainax (the production house) mainly responsible for these discourses (Lamarre, 2009; Denison, 2019). In second place, the absence of closure of the franchise, which has fuelled several readings among audiences. NGE has historical relevance since its original distribution during the late 90s and its expansion to transnational market in the 2000s benefited from the increasing prevalence of internet access worldwide. Audiences contributed to the popularization of the series through fan exegesis across different channels and media, including

websites, wikis, fan forums and video essays. Third, its undeniable status as cult series due to many factors including its popularity, its historical influence in terms of style (Santiago Iglesias et al, 2021), its role as renewer of the anime *mecha* genre (Hernandez-Perez, 2021), and the outstanding involvement of fan audiences with their characters and narrative. NGE could be defined as the epitome of postmodernism and could be analysed in terms of Jamesian theory such as nostalgia and pastiche, common lens employed profusely within the tradition of anime studies (Standish, 1998: 62).

As it will be discussed, these two facets can largely contribute to the discussion of NGE as an 'open work' or 'open text', a category that has been usually inspired in its transmedial complexity and its interaction with fan audiences through previous studies (Ballús & Torrents, 2014, p. 284; Ortega, 2007, p. 217) and resonates with Eco's metaphor for the unfinished nature of art. In this sense, NGE has been regarded as a significant example of 'complex anime', where complexity obeys commercial interests and fulfils the need to occupy a niche in an already saturated anime market (Loriguillo, 2018: 308).

Therefore, the purpose of this research will be to determine to what degree the profusion of open meanings is intentional in NGE and if the use of Judeo-Christian iconography, despite its absence of intertextual relationship with the sacred texts and the hermeneutical tradition, is helping in the construction of this open work.

2. Neon Genesis Evangelion: A fin-de-siècle anime

2.1 About Neon Genesis Evangelion (NGE) and its plot

Neon Genesis Evangelion (*Shin Seiki Evangerion*) is an anime series originally broadcasted in TV Tokyo from October 1995 to March 1996. The story takes place in Tokyo-3, a city created after the destruction of original Tokyo some years after the Second Impact, a natural catastrophe caused by a supernatural being found by explorers in the Antarctic region. Shinji Ikari, an introvert fourteen-year-old boy, is summoned by his estranged father (Gendo Ikari) to NERV headquarters, a military agency, and asked to pilot one of the giant robots ('Evangelion', more commonly referred as EVA units) created to defend the world from an ongoing invasion of alien creatures. These monstrous entities, the 'angels', constitute the prelude to a Third Impact and, consequently, the end of humanity. Meanwhile, SEELE, a secret organization that leads NERV, deliberately pursues the Third Impact as part of the Human Instrumentality Project, a plan to bring together all mankind into a single entity. Shinji is put under the care of Lt. Misato Katsuragi, NERV's Tactical Commander and a survivor of the Second Impact, who will act as a surrogate mother for him. In his mission, he is also joined by two other teenage pilots: Asuka Langley Sohryu, of Japanese and German ascent, and Rei Ayanami, a mysterious girl who, as the series progresses, will be revealed to be a clone of Shinji's mother.

The 26 episodes of NGE are, in many aspects, a renovation and commentary of the formulaic *mecha*[1] and *tokusatsu*[2] traditions. Defying the apparent simplicity of the plot, NGE gradually evolves into a dense and complex storyline, rich in symbols and psychoanalytical

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[1] In manga and anime, *mecha* are stories involving giant piloted vehicles that resemble robots. Since many of these are part of *shōnen* publications (originally addressed to teenagers and young male audiences) this has been considered a trope related to the *shōnen* genre addressed sometimes as *Super Roboto* or 'boy and robot' stories (Hernandez-Perez, 2021).

[2] *Tokusatsu*, translated as 'Special Effects' is a kind of TV serial featuring battles among monsters and heroes. Inspired by the success of *Godzilla* (1953) it has had transnational adaptations such as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993-1996) which employed original footage from *Super Sentai* (1975-2020).

and religious undertones. In the last two episodes, though, the series presents a fractured narrative, focusing on the inner psychological mindscape of the main character. Contrasting with action driven episodes, the last two reuse bank footage, long voiceover and even live footage to convey this narrative. Sometimes this change of tone and style has been explained due to the circumstances surrounding NGE production. Although budget or schedule problems could have helped producers to adopt such a radical turn up in the series narrative style, the lack of plot-planning may have played a part as well (Okada, 1996). Whichever the reason, the ambiguity created around the final events of the story angered fan audiences, but the success of the series and its cult status made possible two movies released in theaters. While *Death & Rebirth* (1997) provided a summary of the first 24 episodes as well as new material, *The End of Evangelion* (1997), a sequel in form of feature film, presented an alternative or complementary ending. Anno did not abandon most of the stylistic resources employed in the series, but he was more ambitious in the visualization of battles, and he extended the footage to explain the consequences of the final confrontation against the angels.

The original anime plus these two films are regarded as the main corpus of NGE and will be the focus of the present work, though it must be noted the existence of a vast array of derived products, a transmedia market strategy known in Japan as 'media mix'. There are, for example, a significant number of manga licensed with the collaboration of Gainax in the form of spin-offs and parallel storylines, and several video games and interactive novels. There is also fanfiction (including popular *dōjinshi*[3] and other non-official products) that still have significant value to fan audiences despite their apocryphal nature. And lastly, Hideaki Anno, the filmmaker responsible for the series, created Studio Khara to produce *Rebuild of Evangelion* (2007-2020), a tetralogy of movies with a storyline that overlaps and replaces the previous TV show. All these products present either significant variations, divergences, or even completely new stories, and will not be discussed here.

Despite the enthusiasm evidenced by the abundance of fan discussion on the series, religious readings of NGE have been generally discouraged in academic studies. While the existence of some degree of intertextuality with religious –and particularly apocalyptic– imagery is recognized, these resources are considered mainly decorative (Malone, 2010: 348; DiTommaso, 2014: 484) or reduced through the lens of postmodern mass culture to 'superficial, surface-level gestures' (Afasanov, 2020: 63).

There have been exceptions, though, and some authors have explored the possibility of deeper meaning, particularly in the use of Judeo-Christian iconography. Ortega (2007) articulated the reading of NGE through the discussion of the myths of Lilith and the Creation by using Gnostic Christian texts and Jewish traditions, but also fan texts and other sources. Her analysis is close to psychoanalytical readings previously performed on the series (Napier, 2002: 114; Tanaka, 2014) in which narrative tropes and main events are explained in symbolic cue and adjusted to an interpretative text or theory. Meanwhile, Bartoli (2008) offered a different reading of NGE focusing strongly on Kabbalah, an esoteric discipline that emerged from Jewish mysticism, to make sense of the more puzzling elements of the show.

Other authors have emphasized a common mistake in Anime Studies, and in NGE in particular: the attempt to analyze Japanese cultural products from a Western-centric perspective. This Western 'gaze' not only concerns religious interpretations, but also those that delve in other areas such as Western Philosophy, Psychology, and Psychoanalysis. In this sense, Vaughan (2009), described a lack of correspondence between semantics (the names of the angels, Adam, Lilith, etc.) and narrative, and proposed an alternative Buddhist

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[3] Self-published manga, *dōjinshi* can be in many aspects the equivalent to Western fanfictions.

interpretation. Shintō mythological influences behind the Judeo-Christian main discourse have been also identified (Lan, 2012: 252; Afasanov, 2020; Cavallaro, 2009).

The aim of the present work is not to settle these academic disputes or to dismiss previous readings of NGE. Rather, our case study intends to analyze the religious elements present in NGE under the light of authorial intent (in particular, why the series employs Western religious symbols in such a manner and with what purpose) and how these were received by the show audiences, within the context of exegesis and collective authorship.

Therefore, what follows is mainly a rhetorical analysis. In the first place, we will describe the specific religious elements of the show and their roots in Western iconographical tradition. Subsequently, we will argue that these elements are part of a conscious strategy of hybridization on behalf of the show's creators to engage with the audience, a fact that becomes self-evident after studying the corpus of interviews available since NGE first aired. We believe that NGE was consciously devised as an 'open text' and that the use of some of the most obscure Western religious motifs was cleverly included as part of this strategy. Lastly, and in order to provide a complete analysis, we will also take into account how these elements were decoded by the show's audience, both in Japan and overseas.

2.2 Iconography, tropes and religious references in NGE

Religious symbols and references to Judeo-Christian iconography and traditions in NGE abound. For example, the use of crosses is ubiquitous. Misato Katsuragi wears a white Greek cross pendant and Lilith is crucified upon a colossal red cross while kept at Central Dogma, part of the NERV installations (Episode 15). The cross is used constantly as a motif, giving shape to shadows, architectural elements, or other fortuitous components of the background. Cross-shaped explosions are also a frequent occurrence, either as two intersecting beams projected into the sky or following the layout of two perpendicular streets (for example, in Episode 2, during Third Angel Sachiel's attack).

The Trees of Life displayed in the series-opening will be especially relevant for our subsequent analysis. They belong to the Kabbalistic tradition, but the specific image of the first one was taken from *Utriusque Cosmi Historia*, a multi-volume work written by Robert Fludd (1617, vol. 2: 157; figure 1, left). The second Tree recreates an engraving from Athanasius Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1653, plate unnumbered; figure 1, right) and is also depicted during the events of *The End of Evangelion*, where an (inverted) version is formed in the sky. This very same Tree appears in Gendo Ikari's office too. The choice of the Tree of Life seems very appropriate. The *sefirot*, represented by the nodes of the tree, are not only considered predicates of God but also types of human behavior (Schmidt-Biggemann, 2008: 90-91). Consequently, the Tree suggests both Religion and Psychology, thus bringing together the two main thematic readings of the series.[4]

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[4] Stephen Chung, a user of the Evamonkey website, even attempted to establish a relationship between the *sefirot* and the personalities of the main NGE characters (Chung, 2021).
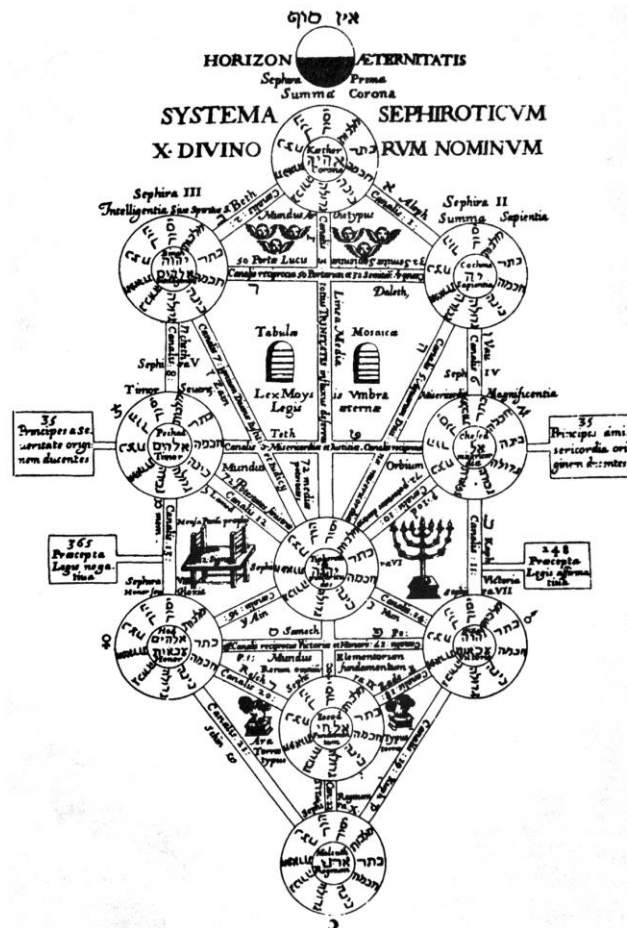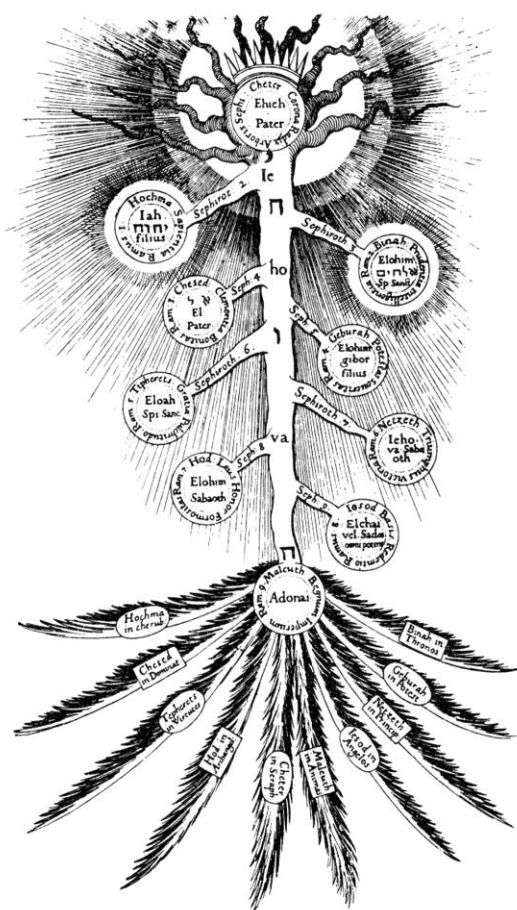
FIGURE 1. Depictions of the Tree of Life in NGE. a:FLUDD'S *UTRIUSQUE COSMI HISTORIA* (1617; Vol. 2, p. 157). b: KIRCHER'S *OEDIPUS AEGYPTIACUS* (1653, Vol. 2, Ch. VIII, plate unnumbered).

Another element employed in this fashion is the diagram inscribed on the floor of Central Dogma (Episode 15). It originally belongs to *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy: And its Systematic Representation According to Abhidhamma Tradition*, by Lama Anagarika Govinda (1937: 124; figure 2, a) and it represents the structure and development of human conscience. However, in NGE appears as a composite design: while the interior part of the circle belongs to Govinda's book, the outer rim and the four stars share great resemblance to the magic circle from the *Lemegeton*, better known as *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, a grimoire from the XVII Century which mostly compiles previous materials (Sloane 3825, Ms., British Museum; figure 2, b).
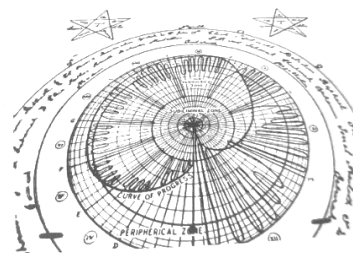
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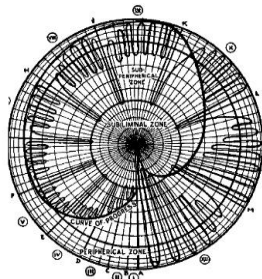
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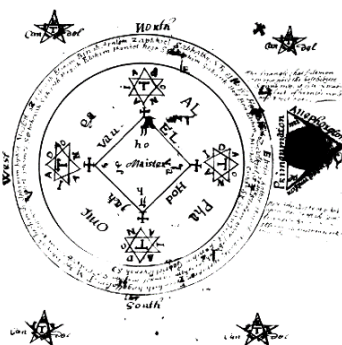
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FIGURE 2. Base elements for the diagram inscribed on the floor of Central Dogma. a: *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy* **(Govinda, 1937: 124); b**: **magic circle from the** *Lemegeton* **(Sloane 3825, Ms., British Museum); c: The final composite, as depicted in** *The Essential Evangelion Chronicle, SIDE B* **(Udon, 2016: 42).**

Halos or other similar bright rings of light appear more sparingly. For example, when the Sixteenth Angel Armisael takes the shape of a halo hovering in the sky before becoming a tendril and launching the attack against EVA 00 (Episode 23) or, in the same episode, when another halo manifests on the head of Unit 00 before it self-destructs.

The presence of winged motifs reinforces this aggregation of religious iconography. Large wings of white light are produced by Adam during the Second Impact (Episode 21). A winged version of EVA 01 confronts a giant Rei Ayanami during the events of the Third Impact (*The End of Evangelion*). Wings are also present at the opening of the series. One of the first shots depicts an 'angel' which closely resembles the typology of a tetramorph (figure 3, a). This is a figure with Eastern roots popularized in the West during the Middle Ages, which has been sometimes identified either as a cherubim or a seraphim (Pașca-Tușa & Popa-Bota, 2019; figure 3, b). In a tetramorph, the first set of wings extends over the creature's head, supposedly veiling the face of God; a second one enshrouds the body while, in the last set, wings are extended in flight (Carruthers, 2009: 5). However, in NGE these three sets have been mirrored for a total of twelve wings, most of them covered with eyes. The head of the tetramorph in the opening of NGE, with its bird-like features, resembles Third Angel Sachiel's from Episode 1. After being attacked by the U.N. Military, Sachiel produces a second face that arises under the first one. This perhaps alludes to the versicles of Ezekiel (1:10) where cherubims are described as having four heads: human, lion, ox and eagle.

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b
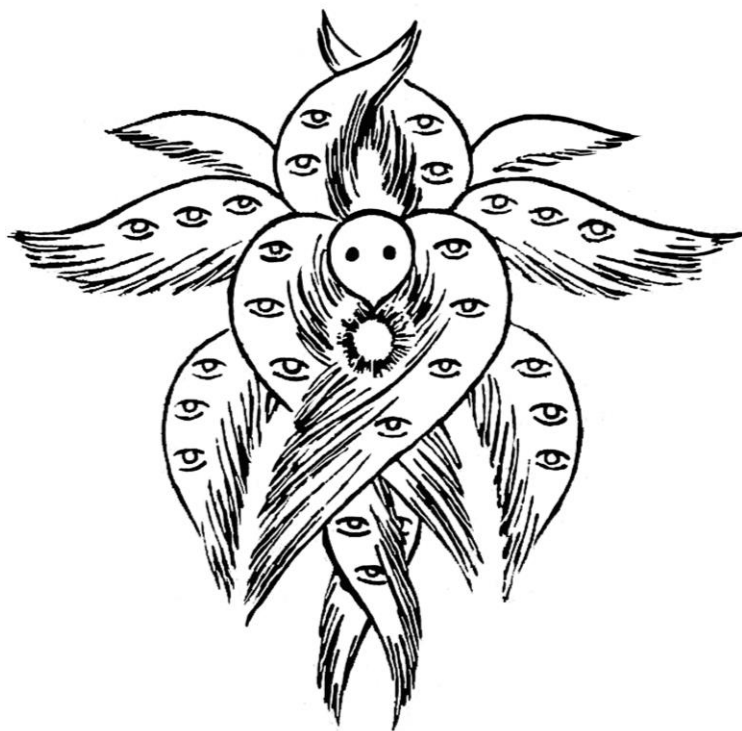
FIGURE 3. a: Representation of the angel from NGE's opening sequence following the typology of a tetramorph. b: An actual tetramorph from Didron (1907: 453). The original belongs to a Byzantine Mosaic at the Convent of Vatopedi, on Mount Athos (XIII Century).

The last shot of the series-opening depicts a fragmentary text from the purported Dead Sea Scrolls (figure 4, a). The mysterious language featured is referred to as 天使の文字 (lit. 'writing of angels') in the original storyboards (GAINAX, 1997a: 554) and, indeed, the first glyph closely resembles the kanji for 'heaven'; which also is the first kanji in 'angel'. This is probably alluding to the various angelic languages developed within the occult Western tradition, as the set of glyphs employed resembles the languages that Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa consigned in his *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533: 273-274; figure 4, b): the celestial writing, the *malachim* writing, and the writing called 'the passing of the river'.

a

b

FIGURE 4 a: Fragmentary text belonging to the Dead Sea Scrolls from NGE opening; b: Celestial language from Agrippa's *DE OCCULTA PHILOSOPHIA* (1533, Vol. 3, Ch. XXX, p. 273).

Lastly, the emblem of NERV is a composite that also alludes to Christian tradition. A fig leaf, representing the leaves that Adam and Eve use to cover themselves in the biblical Genesis, appears accompanying a quote from *Pippa Passes*, a well-known dramatic piece by Robert Browning (1812-1889) that reads: 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world.'

Complementing the imagery aforementioned, the series abounds in the use of terms drawn from religion. The beings that attack Tokyo are referred to as 'angels' in the dubbed English version, and as 'apostles' (使徒) in the Japanese original language. The *mecha* are named 'Evangelion' which is Greek for Gospel, but generally referred to simply as EVA units. This connects them with the biblical Eve, the mother of mankind, as these units hold the soul of the pilots' mothers (Rayhert, 2018: 166-167).

Plenty of terms in the series can be traced back to religious sources, either biblical or apocryphal, such as the names of the angels (Sachiel, Shamshel, etc.). Marduk Institute is named after the patron god of Babylonia, mentioned by Jeremiah (50:2). The Spear of Longinus used by the EVA units is named after the lance with which a Roman soldier pierced Jesus during crucifixion. Others are clearly inspired by Jewish tradition, such as Lilith or the Dead Sea Scrolls, a set of Jewish religious sources. Also, the Chamber of Guf or 'treasure house of souls' (Scholem, 1987: 156) is mentioned by Ritsuko Akagi, the current head of NERV's Research and Development Department (Episode 23).

NGE is seldom the only anime that uses Christian symbols but not its related doctrine, as this is a general practice of the manga and anime industry (see several examples in Barkman, 2010, pp. 36-37). However, and despite the criticism about the lack of depth of religious symbols in the series (see the previous section), some references might be consistent with Judeo-Christian tradition. For instance, in NGE, MAGI (マギ) the informational system created by Naoko Akagi, mother of Ritsuko, is composed of three supercomputers referred as Melchior, Casper, and Balthasar, after the names of the biblical Magi that came from the East to offer gifts after the birth of Jesus. This network represents three aspects of Akagi's personality, as explained in Episode 13 of the series: her roles as a scientist, woman, and mother, respectively. MAGI's decisions have a relevant impact on the plot. In Episode 6, it is used to determine the success rate of a mission. In Episode 11, it is revealed that MAGI is in charge of the city, and the Council merely follows its decisions, which are taken democratically by the three computers. The system also controls many operations in NERV headquarters, as seen in Episode 13. Although not specified in Matthew's gospel, later Christian tradition and apocryphal texts have come to identify the Magi as 'wise men', astrologers, astronomers and even scholars (Powell, 2000: 1).Similarly, MAGI operates as a council of the wise and sometimes even as an oracle of sorts.

In other instances, the manner in which the religious symbols and other elements were designed and included is anything but careless. For example, in one of the production sketches developed for the anime (EVA Production Committe, 2018: 227), Lilith is displayed crucified, with the Spear of Longinus firmly pierced through its chest. Its face has been covered by a mask with a triangle pointing downwards, together with seven eyes arranged in two asymmetrical rows (figure 5, a). The triangle may represent an inverted version of the Eye of Providence (figure 5, b), but with seven eyes instead of one. This hypothesis is supported by the NGE storyboards, where a different configuration of the motif appears (figure 5, c). In this instance, the inverted triangle only encloses the upper-right eye of Lilith (GAINAX, 1997b: 595). Commentary accompanying the production sketch further emphasizes the intentional design, explicitly stating that the bolts used to fix Lilith's hands to the cross must have heptagonal heads, that the nuclear weapons that appear out of focus in the background must be heptagonal in shape, and that the cross itself must have 'pattern details [that] look like a series of heptagon crystals' (EVA Production Committe, 2018: 227). The number seven has great importance both in Christianity and Judaism. Examples can be found regarding the seven deadly sins, the various references in the Book of Revelations or the Creation myth.
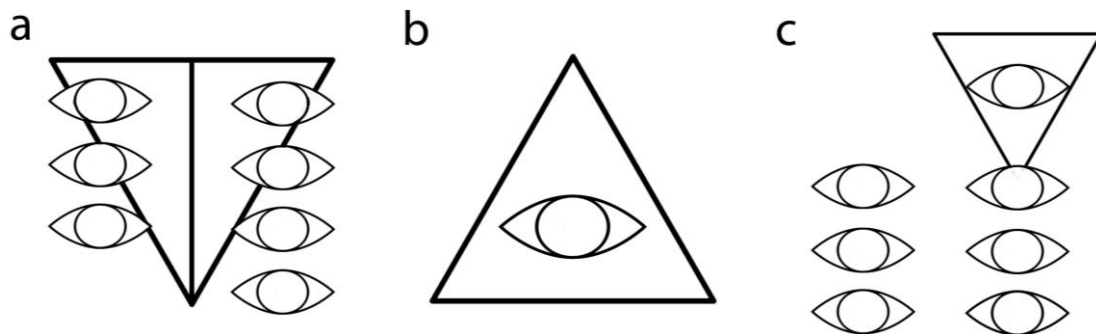
FIGURE 5. a: Triangle and eye arrangement of Lilith's face (together with the dividing vertical line it is also the symbol of SEELE); b: Eye of Providence; c: Alternative configuration for Lilith from NGE storyboards (GAINAX, 1997b: 595).

NGE use of iconography replicates the form of other influential postmodernist texts and, in that sense, the collage of Judeo-Christian iconography could be considered a 'pastiche'. However, this is not an appropriation of a 'dead language' or style in which the original meaning is lost (Jameson, 1991: 17). Its usage is not casual, but rather responds to strategies designed by the production team and, in particular, to Hideaki Anno as the main author.

2.3 Intertextuality and authorial agency

Despite the profusion of religious elements in NGE, Hideaki Anno and others involved in the development of the anime have consistently played down its importance. According to Anno, he is not a religious person but feels close to Shintō beliefs (Anno, 1996). He also lacks an understanding of Christianity himself, and its use in NGE was intended to convey a certain 'mood' or 'atmosphere' (雰囲気) (Anno, 2000b). Supporting Anno's statements, Toshio Okada, co-founder of Gainax, affirmed that the Director never

read the Bible and only took 'a few interesting technical terms' (Izawa, 2003).[5] Anno has confirmed that he used 'dictionaries and the like' (辞書みたい) as sources for research (Anno, 1996).

When Anno or other members of the NGE production team have been inquired about the ulterior motives behind the use of Western religious iconography, they have replied consistently. As we will discuss below, according to their answers, the borrowing of these elements may fulfil one or more of the following aims: Firstly, as a differentiating value; secondly, because of stylistic or cosmetic factors; and thirdly, to imbue the show with a cryptic aura to create a product open to multiple interpretations.

The first and second objectives seem self-explanatory. They were addressed by Assistant Director Kazuya Tsurumaki during a panel in Otakon 2001, when he adduced that the religious background was included to give something unique to NGE to stand out against the numerous other *mecha* at that time. He also stated that Christianity in NGE carries no intended meaning, and that 'while Evangelion's basic plot elements are borrowed from some religious texts and myths, they merely act as inspiration for a different story. They are just there for aesthetics' (Otakon, 2001).

The third objective, however, deserves a deeper analysis. Creating a map of intertextualities through a sequential product implies intentionality: whether discussing hidden references (sometimes referred as 'Easter eggs') or simply adaptation through allusion. Since the late 90s –and this is not arbitrary as it belongs to the same timeframe that NGE– reading movies as hypertexts has become a trend. However, a sequential text cannot always be compared to other hypertexts such as websites (Booker, 2007: 12), because navigation between texts is not always entirely controlled by the user in the case of a TV show. When discussing cult movies, Eco (1985: 5) referred to those texts in which the collage of 'semes' produced an intended map of intertextualities and, therefore, empowered its 'cult' appeal. Regarding Eco, what differentiates the notion of 'cult movie' from other constructs based on collage or pastiche would be the intentionality, since cult movies are not always responding to an intention: 'Nature has spoken here in place of men. If nothing else, this is a phenomenon worthy of veneration' (1985: 4).

In this sense, we agree that in many aspects NGE is a 'cult product' but also an intentional open text, given the interest of the authors in creating an intertextual framework based on Judeo-Christian iconography. Kazuya Tsurumaki clarified that the use of Christian symbols, such as the cross, were intended to be exotic and mysterious (Otakon, 2001; FunNIME, 2002). Also, when discussing the Rebuild movies, Producer Toshimichi Otsuki argued that in the original NGE they used complex words and concepts to create confusion in the viewer deliberately (Newtype USA, 2006). Hideaki Anno even stated that NGE was created as a jigsaw puzzle (ジグソーパズル) for the viewers, with no single univocal answer or interpretation (Newtype, 1996). The terms and concepts used as 'symbols' (記号) in NGE were not intended to carry complete meaning individually; but together, and within the context of the larger narrative of the series, create interrelationships that produce meaning (Anno, 2000a).

These comments imply that NGE was devised in the manner of an open text with the intention of, at a bare minimum, suggesting depth by using religious elements and

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[5] It is worth noting that Okada subsequently dismissed the importance of the psychological elements of NGE, an interpretational framework that has been much more warmly received by academics. See Napier (2005) and Ortega (2007).

providing hidden meanings that require multiple viewings to decode. Whether the series can be effectively decoded or not (at least unequivocally) is a different matter.

This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that some of these elements do not belong strictly to the religious sphere but, more precisely, can be classified as part of the Western Esoteric tradition such as the works of Robert Fludd, Athanasius Kircher, and the *Lemegeton*. It must be noted that an esoteric text is not the same as an open text, the main difference being that an open text admits multiple interpretations while an esoteric text may only have one, which is revealed to the initiated. In this manner, the series conveys the impression of carrying a hidden message that can only be decoded by an 'initiated' segment of the audience. Consequently, NGE cannot be considered an esoteric anime, but rather it can be argued that the esoteric elements included in the show are intended to fuel its 'open' nature.

3. Reception of religious elements by Eastern and Western audiences

In origin, NGE was promoted as a *shōnen* and, as such, implicitly aimed to young male viewers between the ages of 12 and 18. For many audiences, NGE is regarded as a modern amalgam of tropes and formulas from *tokusatsu* and *mecha* series. However, the multi-layered nature of the show appealed to a more mature audience, the so-called *ippanjin* (general population); a heterogeneous group of people who are not regular consumers of anime. This is how NGE reached its massive success. Moreover, NGE shots are saturated with information of all kinds embedded within the visual narrative. This is particularly appealing to *otaku*, the Japanese counterpart to the Western fan.[6] One characteristic of *otaku* is their fixation with every detail and obscure fact from their favorite anime. The possibility to study and decode the information from individual shots became possible with the advent of video recording devices, therefore allowing 'freeze-framing' (Lamarre, 2009: 144-145; Broderick, 2002). Because Hideaki Anno conceived the series as a homage and a critique to *otaku*, it is plausible that the symbolism-heavy shots of NGE were directed toward this segment of the audience. In this manner, *otaku* would be provided with an unlimited amount of readings, granted by that primacy of 'information' over 'meaning'. This further supports the hypothesis that NGE was constructed deliberately as an open text.

These challenges to the audience's perception are not only present when dealing with symbols and concepts of religious nature. In fact, a common narrative device within the series are the text messages that appear in rapid succession across the screen. These are displayed in Japanese, English, and German, bordering the audience's threshold of perception. For example, in Episode 22, they are used to convey the internal struggles of Asuka while she is subjected to a psychological attack from Fifteenth Angel Arael. This resource may be a reminiscence of other works from cinema verité, which have been often considered one of Anno's inspirations for his fractured narrative (Azuma, 2016).

Sometimes, the manner in which NGE addresses the audience resembles American cartoons with a dedicated fanbase such as Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* (1989-) and *Futurama* (1999-2013) as these shows also require the use of the freeze-frame technique to capture all the hidden meanings and gags. *Futurama* went even further by presenting two alien-coded languages, popularly referred to as '*alienese*' 1 and 2, to be deciphered by fans. Through this system of hidden clues and jokes, the creators managed to establish a

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[6] Both terms, *fan* and *otaku* have their own idiosyncrasies. For further examination of this topic, including the pathologization of both fandoms and reasons why they are not always directly interchangeable, see Hills (2002) and Denison (2019).

communication channel with the more devoted members of its audience, sometimes mocking them for their obsession, others fighting them for their criticisms, but always succeeding in keeping them engaged with the show (Knox, 2006).

According to Hideaki Anno, NGE was originally intended for a Japanese audience (Anno and Giner, 1997: 20), but the series became a phenomenon both in Japan and overseas, pushing cultural boundaries, and achieving cult status. The open nature of NGE fuelled fan exegesis, who used Internet to share and discuss their theories and interpretations worldwide. In Japan, the franchise elicited some interest in Christianity and Kabbalah (Thomas, 2012: 71) perhaps as a consequence of its inherent exoticism.

During the panel interview at Otakon 2001, Kazuya Tsurumaki also stated that they may have rethought the choice of using Christian symbols if they had known that the show would reach international audiences (Otakon, 2001). However, these claims should be considered cautiously. Since its inception, Gainax had been repeatedly attempting to reach international markets, especially in North America (Denison, 2019) either by distributing garage kits (through General Productions USA, focused on resin models), promoting the first anime convention in the United States (AnimeCon ´91), or releasing one of the first anime for home-video (*Gunbuster*, also directed by Hideaki Anno, 1988-89). Taking this into consideration, it is not inconceivable that Gainax intended to reach international markets with NGE eventually.

Kazuya Tsurumaki's statements at Otakon 2001 are presumably the consequence of honest concerns about offending believers through misinterpretations. However, a substantial amount of the Judeo-Christian symbols and terminology used were received similarly both by Japanese and Western audiences. It is expected for any audience to have certain notions of Christianity, but many of the religious elements of NGE rely on obscure esoteric sources more than in institutionalized religion. While crosses, wings, and halos are elements with which global audiences are undoubtedly familiarized, many others provide more of a challenge. Therefore, they would appear alien to most members of Western (even Christian) audiences as well as for Japanese.

4. Conclusions

In this research, we have defined exegesis as the interpretation of a cultural text through the lens of authorship. This process of decoding is performed concurrently by various audiences and produces multiple interpretations as a result. Understanding cultural products as a collection of 'open works' following Umberto Eco (1989: 19) imply the existed of audiences with a greater agency while able to identify and decode multiple levels of meaning.

NGE represents an interesting case of study for open texts, as it displays numerous references to Judeo-Christian iconography and religious terminology. While the authors have repeatedly referred to the use of these elements as 'superficial', it is arguable that its inclusion belongs to a conscious strategy of the production team. They aimed not only to create a product with a differential value, distancing itself from generic formulas of anime and science fiction and incorporating foreign elements, but also to deliberately produce an open text.

These religious elements, referred to as 'exotic' or 'mysterious', elicit viewers to actively search for meanings in an approach comprising two levels. The first one is characterized by the use of easily accessible symbols such as crosses or halos. These are recognizable to a large part of transnational audiences, even in contemporary post-secular

societies. In NGE, however, complexity is reinforced by a lack of correspondence between the aforementioned symbols and their related religious narratives. Therefore, audiences familiar with Judeo-Christian traditions may be confused by being unable to deduce the relationship between these elements. In a second level, the use of less accessible symbols within the series, such as those derived from Western Esoteric traditions, aim to suggest hidden meanings and further complexity. Our research has shown that the aggregation of these referents can only be the product of an elaborated documentation work. As a consequence of this abundance of signifiers, NGE produces information overload on the viewer. This may have been devised as a conscious effort to either appeal or mock the enthusiasm of *otaku* fan audiences, who are prone to the active search for meaning - as reflected in their consumer practices. NGE creators were ultimately successful in their strategy, not only because they consciously suggested the existence of an esoteric reading, but because the audiences received the series as such.

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