

Rōjin Z

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF AGING AS COOL ENDEAVOR

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Abstract: *Three years after Akira's brutal dystopie, which marked anime's breakthrough in the West, Akira's director Ōtomo Katsuhiro returns with The old man Z (Rōjin Z, 1991), an anime film in which he tackles two of Japan's main problems at the second turn of the millennium, threatening the archipelago both from outside and from inside: the internationally increasing militarization and the uncontrollably aging population. Taking into account three fundamental, partly contradictory, partly overlapping dimensions of aging – festival, apocalypse and elegia (see Napier 2005) –, this paper analyzes extensively Ōtomo Katsuhiro's construction of a dynamic historical universe in Rōjin Z, in which aging doesn't appear as ideologically emotional-social recycling of the concerned individuals, but as a future-oriented endeavor to refresh, fulfill and transcend the human being.*

Keywords: *anime, aging, militarization, Japan, cultural identity*

Introduction: popular culture as ideological manifesto, aging as social contemplation

It is common knowledge, by now, that the *anime's* (Japanese animation) breakthrough in the West took place after the release of the anime film *Akira* (1988, director: Ōtomo Katsuhiro)¹ – in Japan, however, registered as an absolute flop at the box-office due to the distortion of the traditional anime framework. Thereafter, during the last two and a half decades, the anime as ideology and aesthetics became one of the main means for non-Japanese to perceive and process Japanese contemporary culture, a fact reflected in the establishment of solid, internationally networked fan communities who use in quotidian communication Japanese terms borrowed from anime slang and to whom such values as honesty, courage and perseverance are of great importance – precisely due to anime's influence on their lives and in opposition to the all-encompassing Hollywood trend (see Maas 2000:88, Poitras 2000:7). Deeply rooted in the Japanese traditional

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¹ Personal names are used depending on the conventions of the country of origin: first name followed by last name (Western system) and last name followed by first name (Japanese system). Dates are used upon the Western system. The translations from the Japanese language are my own, unless otherwise acknowledged. For reasons of clearness, Japanese concepts and Japanese titles are listed at their first mentioning in English translation, Japanese writing and transcription in Latin letters; subsequently, the English translation solely is used. The transcription of the Japanese notions, titles and names in Latin letters follows in this paper the adjusted Hepburn system.

visual and scenic art, the anime emerged from the domestic scroll roles and color blockprints of the Japanese pre-modernity (*ukiyo-e*) and incorporated echoes from the Japanese traditional stage arts as well as from Disney's fantasy and dynamics. As such, the anime continued the aesthetic and ideological Japanese pre-modern visual traditions into the modernity, developing rapidly in the postwar era, so that it soon became related to the political radicalism and countercultural experimentalism of the 1960s, only to find its fullest expression in the flourishing culture industry of the 1970s: thus, anime could metamorphose into an alternative stage for new intellectual interests and aesthetic-ideological orientations of the Japanese postwar youth, opposed to more conservative outlooks on their own position within the society (Napier 2005:22; see Kinsella 2000:18). Later on, in the 1980s, this revolutionary underground current increasingly mutated into a mainstream movement, registering a noticeable decline during the early 1990s and an unexpectedly explosive revival in the new millennium.

Modern high-quality anime never forfeits its intrinsic connection with its origins (Japanese pre-modern visual and scenic arts), visible in the permanent, sometimes subliminal, sometimes explicit, tension between composition and technique, between realism and fantasy, between conformism and revolutionarism, between action and characters' design – individuals striving to overcome their pre-established position within the collectivistic system –, which transforms such anime works, as to be seen further below, into ambivalent symbols of a 'new Japan' (see Satō 1992:12). On one hand, this 'new Japan' is a dialectic imagined community consisting of selected artifacts imported from the Western material culture, and a self-confident nation whose inner strength would proudly decline any appropriation tendencies coming from that very West; on the other hand, this same 'new Japan' is the inheritor and repository of ancient Asian cultural histories, actively carrying the responsibility to protect Asia and the Asians from cultural corruption in the globalization age. Thus, though it is regarded as one of the most globalized products of the last decades, the anime is both a culturally oriented, yet market-bound product, whose relevance rests in its saleability, and it appears as an unusually creative and complex phenomenon, reflecting the substantial individual and historical energy, potentials and contradictions of postwar Japan (see Kinsella 2000: 4): in other words, the anime is, simultaneously, a homogenized, consumer-oriented media driven by prevalent standards, and a progressive, significant perpetrator of Japanese culture to the outer world.

After *Akira's* brutal dystopy – the main character Shima Tetsuo stays for the disturbed boy in late modernity who cannot regain his identity, be it within an alienating, achievement-oriented system, or in a liberating outsider position –, the *Akira's* director Ōtomo Katsuhiro returns three years later with *The old man Z (Rōjin Z, 1991)*, an anime film in which he tackles two of Japan's main problems at the second turn of the millennium, threatening the archipelago both from outside and from inside: the internationally increasing militarization and the uncontrollably aging population. The plot is quite simple: the trainee-nurse Mitsuhashi Haruko is informed upon the problem of the population aging, but a practical solution seems to appear as one of her patients, Takazawa Kiyūrō, is selected as guinea pig for a government-founded experiment, in which he is incorporated into a fully automatic bed. This fully automatic bed is programmed to do everything a patient "needs", from bathing the patient up to casual conversation. However, Haruko and her friends feel the urge to save the old patient when it is revealed that the

artificial intelligence of the bed is part of a secret military project – and when the bed’s AI sets itself free from previous programming, in the belief to be the old patient’s deceased wife. Obeying to the old patient’s innermost longings, the bed’s AI attempts to reach the great Buddha statue in Kamakura which had been admired by the freshly united couple during its first dates a long, long while ago. There is a deep-going, heartbreaking contrast between the nostalgic revival of decades-old, partly idealized youth memories as well as the well-meant enthusiasm of simple people – hospital staff and aged computer hackers – and the raw, highly developed violence of military forces, which throws a sobering light upon the meaninglessness of technological solutions to the human needs of togetherness. Taking into account three fundamental, partly contradictory, partly overlapping emotional channels in the examination of aging as cool endeavor in *Rōjin Z* which are extensively analyzed further below, this paper focuses on Ōtomo Katsuhiro’s construction of a dynamic historical universe, in which aging doesn’t appear as ideologically emotional-social recycling of the concerned individuals, but as a future-oriented endeavor to refresh, fulfill and transcend the human self.

Aging and the challenge of heroism

Contrary to classic live cinema, the anime depends generally on its complex expression channels fusing technology and art, profoundly plunging into the main issues of contemporary life via its rapid variations of the narrative levels, its permanently shifting symbolisms and its focus on characters’ development and metamorphosis as basic construction techniques – thus revealing the slithery structure of identity patterns in a world continuously on the run as a symptom and simultaneously as a metaphor for the obsession with radical, spectacular challenges and overwhelming information flows (Levi 2001:41, Slaymaker 2000:13). Within this transgression process from ethics to aesthetics and from message to media, the anime gains a proteic structure to be pinned down in three expression modes: apocalypse (the vision of the end of the world), festival (not *matsuri*, but carnival in Bahtinian sense: the pathos of radical change, of death and renewal) and elegy (pain, loss, absence as well as nostalgia; Napier 2005:23). *Rōjin Z* incorporates within its representation of aging these three emotional channels: firstly, apocalypse appears in the character of the weak, dying widower Takazawa Kiyūrō, where aging is the definite, irreversible end of all possible – personal as well as historical – futures. Secondly, aging can be a chance to regain the community sense and to revive moral beliefs – as it is obvious in the characters of the aged computer hackers. Thirdly, there is the nostalgic dimension of aging – visible in the leitmotivic picture of the married couple Takazawa taken in the times before the wife’s death –, which can mediate the return to a space of hope and fulfillment, strongly contrasting to the late modern age dominated by hedonism and superficiality.

However, *Rōjin Z* is a synthesis. During the 1980s, three anime productions seem to have prepared its emergence, by highlighting specific tendencies: firstly, Miyazaki Hayao’s anime film *Nausicaa from the valley of the winds* (*Kaze no tani no Naushika*, 1984) designs a vision of the apocalypse which implies the salvation of humanity exclusively by means of a direct, peaceful, mutually respectful cooperation with nature, gathering the forces of all survivors. Nausicaa’s balanced, complex personality challenges the image of the broken, confused late modern human being conceptualized by social analysts; her self-sacrifice stands for a necessary, inevitable historical U-turn based on love and compassion

(Kiridoshi 2001:78, Miyazaki 2002:111). Secondly, the anime film *The imperial spaceship fleet: The wings of the Honneamise* (*Ōritsu uchūgun: Oneamise no tsubasa*, 1987), produced by Gainax studio with the largest budget at that time, speaks in nostalgic, bittersweet tones of hopes and dreams and of the price paid for their fulfillment in a world strangely reminiscent of the 1950s (Drazen 2003:236). Lhadatt Shirogh, the male main character, had lost any hope of a socially accredited family life, but, nevertheless, he manages to travel in a capsule in the outer space, thus fulfilling the dream of his religiously overzealous friend Lequinni to launch that capsule before any other would do it, though in the midst of international military conflicts. Lhadatt's faith in his human fellows in spite of their occasional evil behavior inspires a more reflexive existential attitude to unmistakably include tolerance and forgiveness. Two years after this nostalgic, still unusually positive anime film, Miyazaki Hayao's *Kiki's delivery service* (*Majo no takkyūbin*, 1989), Number One at the box-office of the year with over 40 million US dollar sale numbers, reminds of the healthy world of the childhood within the never-ending festival of life. The general optimism is counterpointed by unsettling accents of the first initiation rites; the joy and curiosity of the growing-up process are counted-balanced by the yearning for the bright universe of the family and of the homeland (Inoue 2004:36). Kiki would eventually find the place in the new life order after overcoming the inherent difficulties with that bright attitude to enjoy every day at its fullest, in harmony with herself and with nature. Still: *Akira's* release and its radically divided destiny in Japan and overseas – a historical flop in Japan, a cult product in the West – would brutally disrupt the aesthetic and ideological presentation of these three dimensions of the human existence in anime works – apocalypse, nostalgia and festival; coupled with emperor Hirohito's death and with the economic recession to put an end to the bubble-economy era, *Akira* marked a reference point in the Japanese postwar cultural history.

Three years later, *Rōjin Z* follows up anime works of the 1980s and summarizes their accomplishments in regard to the above mentioned three expression modes – apocalypse, festival and nostalgia –, while tackling the problematic of the population aging: thus, aging becomes an initiation trip and a creative endeavor in a world dominated by the imperative of a cool existence. The director Ōtomo Katsuhiro constructs the plot of *Rōjin Z* actively underlining the power of ordinary facts as capable to trigger extraordinary feelings in conventional social actors as a legitimation for their own existence: as such, it is an artistic process which could easily lead to an effacement of the often arbitrary demarcation line between mass and elite, young and old, rich and poor. Seriously taking into account the challenges posed by the uncontrollable aging to the political, economic and social life, means accepting society as a dynamic, heterogeneous entity, so that changes 'from within' become possible both on collective and on individual level (see Mukerji and Schudson 1991:6, Nehring 1997:15). Ōtomo Katsuhiro reflects upon ideology – in this case, the ideology of aging – as an alternative, cool existential attitude, incorporating apocalypse, festival and nostalgia as chances to a worthwhile existence in the midst of crumbling historical structures. Thus, ideology becomes part of the subjects who are not only possessing it, but also internalizing it as a part of their own self, as Louis Althusser had famously put it decades ago (see Bauman 2002:27). Rather than metamorphosing life into a constant adjourned fantasy, a consumption-stimulated desire, an eternal promise never to be attained, so that the escape from reality becomes possible only as and/or in fantasy (Allison 2000:175), *Rōjin Z* calls for a pragmatic worldview to facilitate the awareness of

actively living by own standards while still accepting and respecting the others in their own singularity.

Aging as individual apocalypse

Like several other post-industrialized, late capitalistic nations, Japan, too, seems to have lost in the postwar era its inner balance, threefold: firstly, the healthy balance between material and mental prosperity; secondly, the positive balance between tradition and innovation; and, thirdly, the progressive balance between individual and society (Castells 1996:225-248). In such a train of thoughts, the most obvious side-effect is the repeated, obsessive representation of aging as a desperate issue, a “black hole” in everyone’s biography, inevitably leading to loneliness and death. Aging human beings position themselves, therefore, outside the mainstream life, and their existence becomes a sort of a ‘parallel discourse’ to the ‘normal world’. Even though it might stem from good intentions, this ‘parallel discourse’ remains, however, extrinsic to the ‘normality’ of common people, and is, as such, unable to enhance and transcend the living subject within its own community. Thus, the very grammatical ‘I’ of that subject alienates, becomes an outside ‘I’ and metamorphoses ineluctably the ‘I’ into an object, whereby the words expressing it can never confer it the joy of life, of a living being with feelings, thoughts and personality (Bauman 2004:35-38, Kristeva 1989:31). It is the world of the strong, dominant other, declining any access to the small self into the ‘within’ of the symbolical fulfillment. While reversing the perspective could bring an welcome change of the perception, the plurality of the possible ‘others’ proves to be both fascinating and disturbing, and points out simultaneously to the plurality of the ‘selves’ – and to the everlasting attempt to grasp it in its diversity, both fascinating and disturbing, as well.

The dying patient Takazawa Kiyūrō is a prototype for the isolation and desperation of life as a doll kept alive by means of technology, but lacking human warmth and company. Mitsuhashi Harukos character – her efforts to rescue and care for the patient in spite of all her problems, including coping with her own everyday challenges – stands for a dynamic, sincere ‘I’ in the midst of an increasingly indifferent society. The representation of aging as hopeless fall in *Rōjin Z* is generally the practical reflection of the postmodern discussions on fragmented identities and the necessary rewriting of historical events: on one hand, there is the disappearance of the social bond, experienced as familiar and necessary for a long while in the past; on the other hand, there is the increasingly accelerated transition from social communities constructed and ‘imagined’ as naturally homogeneous to individual societies, as well constructed and ‘imagined’ as naturally heterogeneous and free (see Shimada 2000:196). Individual aging is in common perception a preparation for death – and death is the apocalypse of the individual, that ‘point of no return’ no one could ever avoid. Nevertheless, death and its function as individual apocalypse doesn’t appear in *Rōjin Z* as the end of the individual life, but rather as a rite of passage, implying both those directly concerned (like Takazawa Kiyūrō) and their immediate environment, as the total collapse of the world “as we know it” refers both to the individual and to social rebirth following apocalyptic cataclysms (Barker 1989:65). However, comparable to reason and love, apocalypse – the third great legitimating narrative of the modern age – seems keep its ideological validity despite disenchanting statements within the happy end aesthetics. *Rōjin Z* summarizes, thus, the characteristics of the fundamentally apocalyptic works by condensing them – narration tangibility, myth negotiation, prophecy credibility, crusade

heroism, therapeutic effect – in a vision of the society as radically transformed by chaos and by the imminent denial of the status quo to revolve into total liberation, resulting into eternal peace and harmony. It is indeed a world in which more intensively than ever human beings became accustomed to the idea of resurrection, while simultaneously still feeling fearful at the idea of death and apocalypse. There are not only few children and generally little hope, but the aging population in specific poor quarters of metropolises – like the Arakawa urban district in *Rōjin Z*, one of the poorest areas of Tokyo – is ignored, driven into despair or exploited as guinea pigs for highly dubious experiments (see Bauman 2004:132). It is basically the artistic visualization of the intrinsically binary nature of apocalyptic teleology: renewal and rebirth emerge from destruction and chaos, but only through the conscious, active intervention of a saviour existing outside of time and space, usually accompanied by a small group of chosen ones, taking over the responsibility for the fate of the world in times of major crisis: the character of Mitsuhashi Haruko.

On a more individual level, through the representation of aging as individual apocalypse, *Rōjin Z* addresses the idea of popular culture as being a barometer for social mental conditions. If the liberation of the individual from historical obligations is unavoidably accompanied by his isolation, then the directly experienced feeling(s) of loneliness within the social group is a basic condition for alienation and identity confusion or even loss: exactly like the isolated aging computer hackers or the four alienated students – Haruko and her friends – striving to rescue the patient captive to the technologically highly developed bed, there seems to be an emergence of increasingly marginalized groups unable to relate to other groups – and gradually unable to relate within the group, either, always at the border to ‘normality’, never within prevalent standards, longing for the right to express themselves (see Kristeva 1989:22). This is where the power of an author of popular-cultural products like Ōtomo Katsuhiro intervenes and takes over the task to “speak for the voiceless”: *Rōjin Z* is a document in Foucault’s parlance, to be understood rather as a symbol of the many “silenced voices”, and less as a cultural artifact to reflect the efforts to reconstruct human endeavors and histories, at a certain point in time and at a specific place. In fact, it is an attempt to revive entities, structures, individualities and relations within the social fabric, as Foucault had put it (Foucault 1966:22; see Barker 1989:284-289). In *Rōjin Z*, history is dissociated from the picture to which it had belonged self-sufficiently for a long while and whereby it had found its anthropological justification, as it is the picture of a thousand-years old collective memory relying on material conditions and longing to regain fresh inputs. Thus, from a desperate endeavor against individual apocalypse, aging becomes a possibility to acknowledge the self in its undeniable singularity throughout times and spaces.

The festival of aging

As a typical anime work, *Rōjin Z* is an unclouded gaze into a world which, in spite undeniable economic success in accordance with Western standards, lives according to other cultural norms than those Jewish-Christian traditions still dominating the Western world. Religious or not, most Westerners have a monotheistic, minimal pair-like vision of the universe governed by one God, one truth, one correct answer to every question, univoque justice eventually triumphing and virtue being rewarded, reason being more reliable than emotion, a sharp delimitation between reality and fantasy – things which are

unconsciously, unquestionably accepted as such. Though, when confronted with something that obviously doesn't take those things for granted, a slight trace of doubt – and possibly, of self-doubt – arises. The brutal confrontation, as in *Rōjin Z*, with other distinct visions of truth, reason, reality impacts on the implicitness of the familiar, coherent universe (Drazen 2003:65, Levi 1997:78): for instance, the technical inferiority of *Rōjin Z* as anime work compared to similar Western or even Japanese productions is counter-balanced by its high-tech appearance, an astonishing fantasy world, with diversified and multi-dimensional characters (e.g., naive, weak men and self-confident, attractive women as well as humanized robots) and an authentic tension between good and evil in interchangeable positions (see Napier 2005:221, Richie 2001:202). Moreover, definitely more intensively than in comparable live action movies, *Rōjin Z* reminds of a world in which the copy is at least as valuable as its original, mainly because that very copy can enhance and eventually replace the original while grasping the essence of the surrounding reality better than the reality itself in its universality penetrating beyond the palpable fact: faithful to its predecessors, classical stage arts and visual traditions, anime works often deal with the essentialization of reality and humanity in their innermost sincere facets.

Rōjin Z highlights the interlocking of ordinary quotidian facts with fantastic universes, bluntly displaying the brutal, inescapable 'either-or' of today's world at large. Its main characters – Mitsuhashi Haruko and her friends Ōe Nobuko, Satō Tomoe and Maeda Mitsuru, the project manager Terada Taku as well as the bed programmer Hasegawa Yoshihiko – are ambiguous individuals, striving to demarcate themselves in the course of action from historical instances perpetuated via taboos, prohibitions and hierarchies, and supported by a strict educational system. This intricate game with traditional values enwombs, however, the illusion and the promise of other spaces allowing for individual freedom, a progressive way of life and for social appreciation. Gradually, the characters as individuals become active presences within the collective discourse, a phenomenon to have been historically observed in the development of the de-sexed good citizens of the late Meiji era into the self-confident and charismatic Japanese individuals of late modernity; in its course, the process touched upon the 'new humans' of the 1910s, the Modern Girl (*moga*) and Modern Boy (*mobo*) of the 1920s and the energetic population of the postwar period (Lloyd 2002:14, Shimada 2002:187). While modern Japanese individuals, enlightened by various romantic and/or subculture emancipation movements identify themselves with the characters configured upon real-existing common citizens, and they absorb them as behavior and thinking models, they metamorphose into faithful, still deeply dialectically modifying 'copies' of this permanently negotiated identity stylization. In this train of thoughts, *Rōjin Z* as anime production becomes a tool to proactively design the fresh Japanese consciousness, sacrosanct in its fascinating singularity and exemplary in its individualizing power (see Foucault 1966:65).

Like McDonalds or Rock'n Roll, the modern high-quality anime as a genre is a child of the postwar era, recording the imagination, but not necessarily the voice, of the radically eccentric life in one of the most industrialized nations. In *Rōjin Z*, the most extreme, most individualistic and distinctly most uncontrollable expression and visual styles flow – particularly visible in the characters of the aging computer hackers and of the young students, communicating such feelings and attitudes as euphoria, desire, disappointment, longing, fatigue, ambition, depression, isolation, weirdness, banality, satire, sometimes in

a more open, sometimes in a more concealed manner (Levi 1997:33, Izawa 2000:141). It filters their emotions and introduces them into an historical context to convey them with the spark of life. *Rōjin Z*'s characters carry along the story their hopes and frustrations, plunge into adventures, exaggerate their physical features, over-react to stimuli, enjoy their tribulations; they faint, sweat, bleed, are visibly excited, dismayed, shocked, embarrassed, amused, as in an attempt to challenge the contemporary Japanese environment with its, still, superhuman self-disciplining mechanisms and strictly controlled mimic reactions. In a geographic space in which media, society and intellectuals focus on the integrity of national ideology, the success of corporate organization, the technological awareness and the aesthetics of history, genuine individuals in the immediate reality seem to be completely over-flooded, together with their creativity. In *Rōjin Z*, this general political project is deliberately questioned, with the simultaneous disclosure of a separate channel to transmit new existential attitudes emerging from the courage to face subjective beginnings. The humanistic value won in the process encompasses tremendous potential for change and progress in a positive, balanced manner.

In late modernity, human togetherness takes on a different shape, as, admittedly, the aging computer hackers in *Rōjin Z* communicate with the highly developed bed on the basis of an indirect relationship: the Internet, which has evolved in the last quarter of the 20th century from an obscure technology without practical application beyond the secluded world of the computer specialists, hackers and counter-cultural groupings, to the status of a 'factory of human existences', accompanying and influencing historical events. In a slightly sarcastic, still somehow ritualistic, tone, *Rōjin Z* speaks of the advantages of the 'old' human togetherness, where direct, face-to-face communication as the essence of human existence hasn't yet been replaced by the Internet as the new communication environment and the new social form, the so called 'network society', developing around the planet (see Castells 2001:12). *Rōjin Z*'s consistent message refers to the oldest fear of mankind – fear of its technological, own-manufactured monsters –, and undermines the ambivalence towards the Internet as a life-conditioning element. Isolating oneself outside the network society is not an alternative, as one is at any rate 'being' integrated within the network system; in fact, from the other end of the world, the bottom-line in *Rōjin Z* is that direct communication is a basic human need, no matter how lonely someone might enjoy being. From the sincere, open communication emerges historical awareness gradually dispersing the fear to face the 'other' in its radical alterity – and to accept it as such.

Moral precepts are purely socio-cultural concepts and no transcendental visions of the universe. Thus, even if loyalty and courage define a figure as a hero, they will not be able to save him in the immediate confrontation with adverse forces: The disenchanting message in *Rōjin Z* is that, though one might attempt to change the world, to save it or simply to make it better or more beautiful, at the end of the day, the world doesn't care about the individual among the others. It is the individual's ability to deal with his fellow human beings within a given historical social structure that makes him special and unique. In this regard, *Rōjin Z* delivers a substantially more honest picture of Japan than the affected Zen philosophy or the complicated Nō symbolism (see Drazen 2003:78, Slaymaker 2000: 7): it is exactly the point where the contrast between the popular culture embedded in the everyday life with its faiths and ideas and the extremely stylized high culture rooted in an imagined past lies – ultimately, it is the pragmatic approach opposing fantasies of 'hot'

girls, resplendent giant robots and elegant samurai swords to sophisticated treatises on the evanescence of all worldly things.

Aging and nostalgic katharsis

The common belief according to which anime is practically Japan talking to itself while consolidating its own myths and behavioral patterns, both implies and sustains the function of the domestic popular culture to display inner cultural tensions (see Nehring 1997:21). For the disenchanting *shinjinrui*² generation in Japan and X generation in the West as well as for their successors, anime appears as an escape possibility at its best form. The illusion of infinite economic growth, of political liberation, of social commitments and of cultural renewal is gone, in the same way as the unshakeable faith in the importance, necessity and rewarding of hard work. As such, anime is created in and for a society in which personal behavior is strictly delimited both by physical agglomeration and by exact emotional conventions; therefore, it has to offer a broad variation of fantasy worlds in which the spectators can realize their dreams and nightmares which would otherwise stay repressed and never experience their fulfillment (Richie 2001:219).

Etymologically originating from *nostos* [Greek for 'to return home'] and *algos* [Greek for 'painful circumstance'], nostalgia refers in the age of the universal disenchantment and liquefied identities to the painful longing for an original home, whereby this 'home' is frequently conceptualized as, basically, an invention of the self (Bauman 2004:96). In *Rōjin Z*, different stages of nostalgic aging are brought to the foreground by the old picture of the young couple Takazawa: starting with the plain nostalgia for a time in which things were 'better, healthier, happier', the next level is the reflexive nostalgia in its painful sentimentalization of past facts, leading to the ultimate dimension of the intellectual nostalgia as the analytic revival of the past (see Ivy 1995:27, Robertson 1991:17-18). The on-going dialectic quest for continuity in the middle of discontinuous realities reconstructs the 'I' as a pragmatic entity searching for solutions and ideals to overcome the typical feeling of the aging individual: „There is simply no place left to go.“ (Davis 1979:89) The old picture of the young couple Takazawa is a refreshing moment in time, including the famous Buddha statue in Kamakura, in itself a symbol of durability and stability, ignoring that false sense of nostalgia as emotional solution to current shortcomings.

Through the direct reference to the Buddha-statue in Kamakura, *Rōjin Z* designs an alternative *furusato* [homeland] challenging the usual nostalgic framework. While the 'nostalgia orgy' of the 1970s meant in the West the return to 'the safe space' of the early modernity, in Japan, nostalgia meant the return to pre-modern times. As historical 'sporty loser', Japan grasped early enough the advantage to accept inevitable facts, treat them accordingly and learn the best lessons out of them (Richie 2001:15): thus, the agricultural communities in which full-time farmers worked in pastoral peace, functioned for a long while as necessary ideological reserves for the metropolitan modern and contemporary

² *Shinjinrui* [new human breed] refers to the generation born in Japan during the 1960s and 1970s. Never having experienced their parents' confrontation with hardship and loss, but having been born into abundance and luxury, the *shinjinrui*-Japanese stereotypically deal with different ideals and values than the previous generation, such as materialism and fun, and the refusal to commit to outside constraints. Generally, they are considered to be the Japanese equivalent to the Western X generation (Sugimoto 1997:69).

Japan. The celebration of the imaginary *furusato* as contrary to the concrete *nōson* [farmer village] appeared as a direct consequence of the 1966 – the zero-year of the ‘my car’ era in the Japanese media (see Davis 1979:140). Nowadays conceptualized as ‘homeland’ or ‘home’ in the sense of a familiar place where one was born and/or grew up, the term ‘*furusato*’ is currently one of the most popular notions and symbols employed by Japanese politicians, town planners and mass media advisors: the ubiquity of the *furusato* itself derives from the various contexts highlighting belonging and security, in opposition with the alienating realities of Japan’s urban areas (Ivy 1995:103-108, Morris-Suzuki 1998:131). In *Rōjin Z*, *furusato* as *furusato zukuri* [homeland creation/construction] provides a basis for the political project of the systematization of common memories and social reproduction actions; it is infused with the yearning for the past and the discontent with the present to legitimate an unfulfilling future (see Robertson 1991:13-16). The Buddha-statue in Kamakura as a palpable *furusato zukuri* integrates quotidian activities into the permanent pursuit of the human being for a healthy work-life balance and authentic happiness.

Though primarily one more Japanese cultural commodity such as technology or cars, anime and thus *Rōjin Z* mediates, beyond (techno-) orientalist clichés, an worldview in which classical rapports between production and consumption, self and other, free speech and political correctness, ontology and axiology are frontally challenged, subtly undermined and, potentially, brutally disrupted. While being a provocation to the Western hegemony without basically questioning it because it exists as such only in the Western hierarchy, the anime techno-orientalizes Japan within a self-referred legitimization process (see Morley and Robins 1995:168). Thus, aging appears in *Rōjin Z* as the result of nostalgic reviews and disappointed expectations. The hybrid realities of today’s Japan with its multiple transnational exchanges in commerce, culture, science, technology are incorporated within the prevalent political discourses on national purity and homogeneity, nostalgically drawing their arguments from pre-modern remembrances, while the simple fact that this disturbing cultural reconfiguration is an ideological attempt to deny and suppress national fears through rationalizing technologies, individualizing practices and totalizing machineries is furtively ignored. Aging is a vital dialectics in *Rōjin Z*, reminding that reproductive nostalgia and neo-nostalgia cannot completely eliminate passive longings of many Japanese individuals for the revival of a past long-gone (Ivy 1995:69; see Morris Suzuki 1998:28). Obsessed to catch up with Western standards of power and development, the Meiji technocrats imported in a record time-frame not only technologies and institutions of Western capitalism, but also centuries of aesthetic theories, literary forms and social representation modes; not only railways, but also Descartes; not only financial capital, but also Renaissance perspective; not only Prussian militarism, but also Ibsen dramatism. It was an unbalanced relationship penetrated by strong undercurrents of seduction, resistance and assimilation, though the fundamental point of the early Meiji era had consisted in the constitution of a modern nation-state capable to successfully compete with comparable political structures in the West: idealistic as it might have felt, it was indeed an all-encompassing process leading only decades later to the activation of the effective semiotic constellation of the pre-Meiji Japan.

Conclusions: towards a popular culture of common sense

At the dawn of the new millennium, Japan sometimes seems, seen from the outside, like a disappearing country: the result of a way-too-fast modernized world having jumped from premodernity by a much-too-brief modernization process directly into postmodernity. While such anime films like *Nausicaä from the valley of the winds*, *The imperial spaceship fleet: The wings of Honneamise*, *Akira* and *Kiki's delivery service* could stay as the auftakt to the great disenchantment at the dawn of the 1990s, following emperor Hirohito's the death on January 7th, 1989 and the enormous economic recession in the year 1990, major events such as the case of the girl serial murderer Miyazaki Tsutomu (1988-1989), the Great Kansai Earthquake (January 17th, 1995) and the sarin gas attack of the Aum Shinrikyō cult (March 20th, 1995 in Tokyo subway) profoundly shook the Japanese society. Accordingly, many anime works released since the beginning of the 1990s typically carry the atmosphere of constant fearfulness, faithfully reflecting the attitude of constant uncertainty in the Japanese society after the brutal awaking from the widely shared-faith of Japan being a clean, non-violent world based on a perfectly functioning social system.

In its ambiguous representation of aging, *Rōjin Z* takes over the task to produce and send warning signals on sensitive, though ignored topics, by means of popular-cultural elements. If the power of the anime consists in its abstract form and its practical contents, *Rōjin Z* belongs to the category of disenchanting works suggesting direct solutions without unnecessary lecturing. This occurs while re-shaping aging not as a lost area of history and society, but as a threefold phenomenon including visions and solutions.

On a first level, *Rōjin Z* overcomes the optimism of *Nausicaä from the valley of the winds* as apocalyptic work and positions itself between *Akira* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*: Apocalypse seen as an end of the world as "we know it" leads to an identity constitution process as a lonely, alienating endeavor in a disappearing universe. The ultimate fight in *Akira* between the main character Tetsuo against his best friend Kaneda Shōtarō in and over the Olympic stadium in Yoyogi contains a clear reference to the pre-*shinjinrui* generation which had developed the Olympic stadium as a proud symbol of 'new Japan', and points out at the emergence of a new world from Tetsuo's orgy of destruction: a world which cannot contain any re-assuring policies within a fragile future (Satō 1992:35, Standish 1998:62). *Rōjin Z* and its embittered representation of aging is continued in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, proving that the liberation of the individual from historical compulsions only means his direct isolation: like the four main figures of the *Evangelion* series – the three alienated teenagers and their 29-years old supervisor –, the largest part of the mankind seems to be in an unequal relationship power to a superior force, known as an increasingly abstract elite (see Azuma 2001:16). Later anime productions will address even more intensively this large issue of myth and illusion destruction, preserving in their troubling effect the refusal to univoquely seize the human being as a binary structure consisting of a good and an evil side or a rational and a animal half. In particular, anime series such as *Serial Experiment Lain* (same title in Japanese, 1998, direction: Nakamura Ryūtarō) or *Death Note (Dêsu nôto, 2006-2007, direction: Araki Tetsurō)* celebrate the evil in humans: their tone swears on the failure of the culture, on the incompatibility of human impulses to cultural requirements, reminding of a dark worldview reminiscent of Arthur Schopenhauer.

On a second level, *Rōjin Z* takes over as a celebration work the positive tones from *The wings of Honneamise* and announces later masterpieces such as *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke hime*, 1997, direction: Miyazaki Hayao) which would describe the necessity of persistent dreams and of the belief in gods in a crumbling world; in its visual representation of epic fights between gods and humans, beyond the surface of an ideological glorification of pure nature in opposition to the insanity of humans, there is a dramatic hymn to life and love as the best things one could possess (Murase 2004:65). The climax of this celebrating development in anime works is *Hōhokeyo: My neighbours, the Yamadas* (*Hōhokeyo tonari no Yamada kun*, 1999, direction: Takahata Isao) which transmits in short sketches the subtle message that life can be eventless and a man might be mocked by his own children, neglected by his own wife, overseen at work by his peers, but he still has his dreams of an heroic existence where he might not be able to save the whole world, but at least his own family from quotidian senselessness (Nakamura 1999:29, Takahata 1999:21). Not only young Japanese in post-recession Japan can extract fresh life projects and models to follow from such works, but also Western youngsters in a supersaturated society. In spite its economic failure at the box-office, this bright, cheerful family comedy tells of family values and inter-generational interdependence, of social conformism and personal fulfillment, of everyday love in the life of average actors and of individual solutions to social compulsions.

On a third level, *Rōjin Z* is a source of inspiration as a nostalgic work in the trajectory of bright humanism initiated by *Kiki's delivery service* and prepares the way ahead for such anime films like *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku kidōtai*, literally: *The mobile employment troop against chaos attacks*, 1996, direction: Oshii Mamoru), which tell of human longings in a world populated by cyborgs and robots, or for such anime series like *Cowboy Bebop* (*Kaubōi Bibappu*, 1998, direction: Watanabe Shin'ichirō): the adventures and concerns of the main characters in *Cowboy Bebop* are those of quotidian social actors, even if they live in an era in which the entire universe had been transformed into a human habitat. They do not admit it, but they long for love and security as well as for clear guidelines against the background of a frequently dark or unresolved past. It is the quest for one's profound self as driven by individuals belonging to a generation who often feels left alone at crossroads without any clear directions sings. The old models vanished in intellectual treatises on humanity, reason and progress, while those supposed to use them as existential and spiritual models drowned into confusion and isolation (see Bauman 2002:31). The climax of this development is the anime film *Five centimeter per second* (*Byōsoku go senchimētoru*, 2008, direction: Shinkai Makoto), evoking the evanescence of the human existence and describing in heartbreaking tones the loss, regain and renewed loss of love in an everyday life where too many things happen at once.

Emerging in the stress ratio between the ephemeral plasticity of quotidian coolness and the confident durability of the Japanese classical culture, the anime absorbed and adapted alien influences around a firm core (see Shimizu 2004:195; see Nye 2004:26, Yamanouchi and Sakai 2003:55): cultural power as a self-reflexive process is, in this perspective, a consequence of economic growth, becoming, in turn, the engine of economic growth in times of crisis. While the assumption that exactly Japan's insularity kept it from exploiting the latent power of its cultural assets at the same or at least at a comparable extent as other nations did with their reserves of soft power, might be somehow correct, current substantial and repetitive globalization ruptures, economic recessions and political

confusions undermine and disconcert Japan in its fundamental values and traditional ideals, affecting broad fields of life, from management culture to family lifestyle – thus forcing it to re-think its strategies in dealing with cultural issues as means of historical resurrection. Japan's long experience of remarkable come-backs naturally suggests rebirth out of today's decline, not at least due to its immense reserves of potential, gentle reinvigoration mechanisms. *Rōjin Z's* representation of aging basically highlights the – maybe sometimes forgotten – fact that old persons are similar to young people in their pursuit for happiness, singular individualities striving to overcome the difficulties of life by assuming cool aplomb and fresh joy. Through the warm humanism of this positive message, *Rōjin Z* aligns itself in the tradition of optimistic art works describing the human being as a fascinating, however incomplete, entity to be admired and celebrated, instead of being indoctrinated and condemned.

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