

“The End of Humanity: Elegiac not Apocalyptic©”

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The end of humanity is a topic that has been explored by satirists, moralists, theologians, and the writers of romance, science-fiction, and fantasy. Endings, whether of one's own life, one's family, an organization, a culture, a language, or even a biological species, capture our imaginations. Endings represent a closing of a door and an ending of agency.

In Western religious thought, the end of humanity is connected with the concept of the end of the world and is seen as the opportunity for the unveiling (the original Western meaning of the word “apocalypse”) of a deeper truth and a firmer reality. In literary criticism of anime, apocalyptic has been used in a much more subjective manner. Napier uses the term to refer to the edge between “coherence and dissolution”. The category thus includes stories about the end of the physical world, disaster films about the end of most (but not all) humanity, and the end of a specific culture or group of people (genocide). In this broad definition the term apocalyptic can be applied to any story that includes a disaster of a magnitude sufficient to cause the total loss of personal and social structure. For example, the anime dramas of Akira and Evangelion are categorized as apocalyptic. But in these stories, large portions of humanity survive and there is a continuity of culture before and after the apocalyptic events.

In this paper we will look at anime and manga set in worlds where humanity is ending but the stories are not characterized by violence, nor do the plots of these works revolve around the characters' struggles to either save themselves or humanity. The ending of humanity is presented as foreseeable but not imminent, and characters are generally not personally endangered and can anticipate living a full life. While the individuals are not personally threatened, they are also not empowered to address the forces that are ending humanity. In many of these stories the causes of humanity's decline are unknown or never revealed. This absence of a description conveys the message that it is not even possible to discuss the option of avoiding humanity's end. Because the characters are at least relatively secure the characters are tasked to address the small stories of their lives and seek personal meaning. The characters have time to reflect on the passing of humanity. This reflection can include actions such as mourning, celebrating of the past, or simply bearing witness to the passing. As a result these stories are far more elegiac than apocalyptic. Examples of these works are two manga by Ashinano Hitoshi, “Yokohama Shopping Log” and “Isaki of the Cub”, and the anime series, “Humanity has Declined,” “Sound of the Sky,” and “Girls' Last Tour”.

Yokohama Shopping Log won the 2007 Seiun Award for best science fiction manga. In the manga, we are introduced to a future world where the population has declined dramatically; an ever rising sea level has flooded the coastal cities; and Mount Fuji has been reduced in height by some unnamed cataclysm. The protagonist is a female

android, Hatsuseno Alpha. Alpha runs a small café and the series follows her daily life over a period of perhaps 30 years. During this time the series presents her interaction with her customers, locals, and other androids. We see the world through Alpha's eyes and her camera.

In Yokohama Shopping Log the post-human world will not be empty nor will humanity be forgotten. The androids are essentially immortal and are referred to as "humanity's children." In addition, for unknown reasons new creations begin appearing in the land. These creations emerge out of the ground and are neither plant, fungus, or mineral. The new growths take the form of buildings, streetlights, and even living statues. These new growths are described as the earth's memories of humanity. It is clear in the stories that the growths signify a return of the sacred into the world. As the story of Yokohama Shopping Log progresses, these growths become more and more common as the number of humans declines. In this way a new world fills in behind the vanishing humans. Finally, while roads and buildings on land crumble and decay, buildings swallowed up by the rising sea are preserved. At night the street lights from the submerged towns continue to shine, marking where cities have vanished under the waves.

In the series "Humanity has Declined," a much sharper satirical tone is taken. Humanity is declining and the cause is no longer remembered. In this world, humanity is being replaced by the Fairies, six inch tall perpetually smiling animated dolls. The series is narrated by a young woman assigned the task of mediating between the Fairies and humanity.

The Fairies, are simultaneously cute, friendly, powerful, infantile, and motivated by desires that are neither understandable nor necessarily aligned with those of humanity. The Fairies are capable of rapidly reproducing themselves and creating any physical object no matter how large or complex. However, as their desires are neither constant or understandable, their creations are ephemeral, inscrutable, and often threatening. As such, Fairies can be taken as symbols of advanced technology with its almost infinite capacity to meet any material need but inability to provide goals or values that could guide its use.

This series focuses on the alienation of individuals from the technology that produces our food, allows us to communicate, and powers our cities. In addition, the series satirizes bureaucracies and the concept of loyalty to the group. The Mediator is employed by an organization housed in a decaying building and staffed by older men who are irresponsible, ineffective, and self-serving. The individuals are lost in their own preoccupations and have no interest in explaining what the duties of the Mediator are or how they should be achieved. Such a description might well be a reflection of young adult's perceptions of Japanese corporate life.

In "Isaki of the Cub" we are introduced to a world where humanity is not so much declining as shrinking to the point of irrelevance in a world mysteriously growing ever larger. The expansion of the world has now made communities ten times farther apart

and mountains ten times higher than before. As a result humanity takes up a smaller and smaller portion of a very empty world. In this world airplanes are the preferred means of travel. Isaki, a high school student and main character of the stories, is too young and inexperienced to do more than simply accept the world as it is presented to him. His senpai is Shiro, an older woman who oversees his exploration of the world and is the owner of the Piper Cub airplane for which the manga is named. Shiro has comfortably settled into a life of tracking the changes in the world but taking no action in response.

In the anime “Sound of the Sky,” we are introduced to five young female soldiers in a future version of Europe that has been ravaged by generations of war. In these wars there was no victor. Only small pockets of humanity remain and they are plagued by diseases that are the remnants of biological weapons used in the wars. Vast areas of the world are uninhabitable and the seas are described as being dead. The women are stationed at a largely dysfunctional military base near a small Swiss village. In the anime we follow the five women as they interact and deal with each other and the members of the local community. The theme of the anime is the women’s and the community’s efforts to find personal peace and healing against a backdrop of the threat of disease, famine, and the reemergence of senseless war.

The most recent of the anime series is “Girls’ Last Tour”. Two young female soldiers in a military vehicle travel through a multi-tiered and seemingly never ending Japanese city. The women have been raised under confined conditions dictated by the final events of the war. As a result, they have little understanding of the ruined city around them. As a final assignment they have been sent out on an open-ended reconnaissance tour. As they depart, their home comes under attack, and it is implied that they have nothing to which they can return. Tasked with unending traveling, they search for water, fuel, and food. On this journey they encounter the mundane and mysterious. The series ends as it began, with the two girls continuing their journey.

There are a number of common elements in these four works. The stories typically include a replacement of humanity by either new and independent forms of life, a resurgence of nature, or a return of the spiritual. In “Yokohama Shopping Log” the sacred is literally irrupting into the world in the form of mysterious growths. In ‘Girls’ Last Tour” we see enigmatic statues filling the empty city, and a well-lit but silent temple. In “Humanity Has Declined” it is the six inch high Fairies who will replace humanity. In “Isaki of the Cub” nature is increasing and diluting humanity’s existence. Thus the stories make it clear that while humanity’s day is fast closing, the story of the world continues.

A second theme is a criticism of the military. In many of the stories, military activities are viewed as negative. In “Yokohama Shopping Log” missiles are turned into fireworks. In “Humanity Has Declined” firearms are presented as an aberrant fetish indicating dysfunctional authority. In “Sound of the Sky” and “Girls’ Last Tour” warfare is the scourge that has brought humanity to its knees.

Finally, there is a consistency in the gender and reproductive status of the protagonists in these works. The characters are for the most part women who are not involved in heterosexual relationships, have no children nor plan on having a family. In "Yokohama Shopping Log" Alpha, and most of the other androids, appear as attractive young women and they regard themselves as female. However, Alpha indicates that she does not understand heterosexual love and is better suited to watch the passing of the generations from a distance. In "Humanity Has Declined" the protagonist is a young woman. Older and younger adult males are present in the story, however, she expresses no indication of any interest in finding a partner. Shiro is the central figure in "Isaki of the Cub" and is Isaki's and our window on understanding the world. She is a famous and capable pilot but she is single and again shows no interest in marrying or having children. The five lead characters of "Sound of the Sky" are unmarried women roughly between the ages of 14 and 25, yet there is little or no discussion of romance, marriage, or having a family. The two female characters in "Girls Last Tour" encounter an adult male but there is no thought of trying to form any relationship, and the individual soon departs.

The choice of unmarried women characters in these stories may be read as an explicit rejection of the traditional role of the male as the traditional active agent of society. In these worlds there are no worthy battles to be fought, no scientific discoveries to be made, no buildings to be built, and no beasts to be slain. The absence of heterosexual relationships for the women also emphasizes that the characters are not vehicles for the biological future of humanity.

The exception to the above is Isaki who is male and while oblivious is the subject of the attention of two female characters. It is useful to note that at the end of Isaki's Cub he is pushed out of the world of the story and returned to normal daily life.

Why are works about the end of humanity created? Beginning with stories about the "Last man on earth" in the early 1800s, and H. G. Wells' novel "The Time Machine" in 1895, stories of the end of humanity have captured our interest. Such stories provide an opportunity to address, wrestle with, or banish the issues of our own mortality and the ephemeral nature of life. Stories about the end of humanity also provide opportunities to work out our fears about the future and to examine the conflicts in current society. The stories place all of humanity, its achievements and follies, into a "completed act" that can be viewed and evaluated as a whole. In addition, by stripping the complexity of technology and culture from individuals, the final remnants of humanity appear more human than the faceless crowds of the current world. The remaining small communities provide a backdrop for human-sized stories that are significant because now every individual "counts."

End of humanity stories in anime and manga exist against the backdrop of the declining population of Japan. This decline is exacerbated in rural small towns and villages. These communities have watched the number of children in the town shrink and vanish with the departure of young adults for larger towns. The communities are now facing actual extinction as the remaining population ages to the point that the communities are

no longer viable. The decline in rural populations appears in many recent anime such as “Letter to Mono,” “Sakura Trick,” “Non Non Biyori,” “The Wolf Children, Rain and Snow,” and “Your Name”.

The loss of population presents Japan with a problem for which there is no easy solution. Japan must either open up to ever larger numbers of immigration, change the fundamental roles of men and women to facilitate having and raising children or continue on its present course of maintaining the status quo and accept the declines that result. All of these options will end existing Japanese culture by either introducing dramatic changes to the culture or by the continued decline in the number of children born.

In this context, elegiac “end of humanity” stories reflect a resignation to the end of Japanese culture. The works present worlds where loss is unavoidable and is the basis for a quiet mourning and celebration of the remnants of life. The works are not intended to be a warning but rather a comfort to audiences. The stories promise that while current declines will ultimately prove fatal, maintaining cultural values is possible even until the very end.

The stories also draw upon the Japanese aesthetic of loss. The concepts of “mono no aware” and “wabi sabi” state that all life, and in particular all happiness, is transitory. Dr. Tanaka in her work “The Apocalypse in Japanese Science Fiction” argues that the origin of this arises from the Buddhist cyclical view of time. In the Heian period the upper classes believed that the world followed a cycle of three repeating ages and that society had now entered in to the third and darkest of the three ages. The first of the three ages is the period of time immediately following the Buddha’s death when enlightenment is possible by following the teachings of the Buddha. In the second age people are unable to obtain enlightenment through the Buddha’s teachings but the teachings themselves remain understandable to humanity. In the third age all society becomes morally corrupt and the ability to even understand the Buddha’s teachings are lost. In the third age it is impossible that truth, understanding, or anything of merit can be maintained on a consistent basis. For certain Buddhist sects perfection would only occur after death when the soul entered “the pure land.” These beliefs led to the expectation that all of life will be dominated by transience and the belief that “loss,” not “hope,” was the hallmark of life.

This view, while pessimistic, was not nihilistic. Time is not linear but cyclical, and as a spring will follow a hard winter, one day there will come a new Buddha who will restore enlightenment to a new humanity in a new world. As a result, while there is sorrow with the loss of the current humanity, there is a promise that the cosmos will go on and in another cycle humanity will be restored. From this perspective the end of humanity is an expected event and not something to be fought or feared. It is, rather, something to be thoughtfully considered and in the end accepted as a part of the normal progression of events.

In summary, the five works and other anime and manga in this category provide the reader/viewer a distinctive and powerful experience. The stories draw on both the current social issue of declining population and Buddhist religious views of time and history. Birthrates are below replacement rates in China, Europe, and Russia, and in the Caucasian portion of the United States. As a result, these works have a widespread and growing relevance to much of the rest of the world. They communicate the message that even with the ephemeral nature of humanity one can find value and meaning in life.