Nihilism in Ghost in the Shell

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In Ghost in the Shell, Kusanagi completely fails to find out who she is – the question she has been doggedly asking throughout the whole film. Yet, she ends the movie by transcending herself in an uplifting scene replete with angel feathers and symbols of rebirth. Why, you might wonder, does Oshii want us to be so happy about finding out that we have no concrete identities? A possible answer lies in the philosophies of existential and epistemological nihilism. Existential nihilism is the belief that life has no meaning, purpose or value, and epistemological nihilism is the idea that it is not possible to really know anything. Both of these types of nihilism make up much of the philosophy of the movie, Ghost in the Shell, and knowing them turns a confusing (if visually awesome) action flick into a fascinating and subversive philosophical manifesto (slash action flick). We find nihilism in the visual motif of reflections, which Oshii uses to make the viewer feel how illusory the ‘real world’ on screen is. We find it in the concept of the Übermensch, which Oshii brings out through his characters. Finally, we find it in Oshii’s reasons for choosing to use Christian imagery in a film that paradoxically tears down the ideas of God, values and belief systems.

To begin with, the world of Ghost in the Shell is visually loaded with reflections, water, glass, distortions, and tricks of light. Kusanagi thinks through her identity crisis underwater, wanders through glassy stretches of city, and flickers in and out of visual existence with her futuristic thermostic camouflage. These images are all deliberate – they consistently symbolize the ‘slipperiness’ of reality and our inability to perceive what is real. As Richard Suchenski writes:

“...One of the main functions of Oshii's work is to draw attention to the limitations of human vision and bring the viewer to a point where he/she can recognise the abstract, possibly transcendental, world underlying the seemingly solid object-oriented one we inhabit.” (Richard Suchenski, “Mamoru Oshii”)

Interestingly, this weakness of human vision isn't just limited to the characters—Oshii wants the audience to experience it, too. For instance, in Ghost in the Shell: Innocence, after a seemingly normal business conference ends, nearly all of the attendees vanish. As viewers we are surprised to find they were only holographically present—literal tricks of the light, representing the idea that what seems concrete could easily be an illusion. In other words, the fallacies of the movie world apply to our world, too. In addition, the Puppet Master alludes to a Biblical quote about glass to refer to how deceptive Major Kusanagi's understanding of reality is. The Puppet Master knows Kusanagi will see him “through a glass, darkly’ (that is, in the illusory mannequin shell he uses to navigate the ‘real world’) and only later ‘face to face’ (when they merge together as data.) Glass is verbally equated to a distortion that prevents us from perceiving what is really there.

Overall, these motifs of reflections, glass and water are a poetic expression of the idea that ‘we cannot know that anything is real’. They are visual symbols of epistemological nihilism that show up over and over in Ghost in the Shell.

Next there are the characters in Oshii’s films, whose actions and words express the nihilistic concept of the Übermensch, or ‘above-human’. This concept comes from Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed that the advent of nihilism would cause the world to fall into despair, whereupon we would all have to find a way of coping or die out. His solution was the Übermensch—literally meaning ‘super-human’—a superior being that can coexist peacefully with the idea of a meaningless life.

Nietzsche thought the Übermensch would rise from unnatural selection that favored a ‘superior’ human. Today, however, the idea of breeding a super-human out of superior genetic material is incredibly controversial—who decides what material is superior and what isn’t? In a post-Holocaust world, we tend to believe that eugenics has far too much potential to be abused and to encourage atrocities against groups of people to merit its use. Postmodernism, on the other hand, has the idea of the cyborg: another, more universal means of raising the human to the level of the Übermensch.

One could argue that the Puppet Master from Ghost in the Shell is the Übermensch—a being that transcends the human. The Puppet Master not supposed to be sentient and no one knows what his raison d'être is, if he even has one. He does not despair about how he can never be ‘human’, though. Like the Übermensch, the Puppet Master embraces his undefined, meaningless creative potential and builds himself a new and less illusory identity and purpose. He does not have whatever it takes to be considered ‘human’ but he doesn’t care— he transcend the flawed concept of there being such a thing as a human nature at all. This seems to match Nietzsche’s sentiments:

“Truth and nature [i.e. the nature of things] are inventions by means of which men escape from this world. The Übermensch is also free from these failings.” -Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Or, in the more succinct words of the Puppet Master,

“Your effort to remain what you are is what limits you.”

Both Nietzsche and the Puppet Master disdain the pursuit of a concrete identity, or ‘true nature’ as a failing or a limitation. The Puppet Master is telling Kusanagi that the effort to distinguish whether she is ‘human’ or not is a waste of time, and that by leaving the need to define herself as ‘human’ behind she can transcend humanity and become super-human herself. While this movie is set in the future, the concepts are relevant to us in the present. The film offers us an alternative to torturing ourselves over the impossibility of knowing who we are in the face of existential and epistemological meaninglessness. The solution is to embrace meaninglessness; only then will we know freedom. “The net is vast, and infinite,” says Kusanagi-Puppet-Master at the end of the film. She knows that once you have discarded stable values, the creative possibilities are endless.

As an aside, another of Oshii’s films, Angel’s Egg, supplements this point of view nicely. The girl from Angel’s Egg is unable to cope with the loss of her stable values, when the egg is broken open and she discovers nothing inside to affirm her faith. She personifies, more than the despair of losing faith in Christianity, the existential despair of losing faith in values themselves. In this light the swordsman can be seen as a personification...
of epistemology--the search for knowledge. Using epistemology we smash open the world’s oldest value systems and reveal their emptiness. Overall, this fruitless search for stable identity and stable values, seen in many of Oshii’s films, also seems to support the idea of epistemological nihilism.

Finally comes the question of why Oshii chose to use uplifting imagery--specifically, uplifting Christian imagery--to describe Major Kusanagi’s loss of self. Angus McBlaine in *Anime and Philosophy* seems to think of this as the movie not living up to its posthuman potential:

> “The film falls prey to this leaning in its use of angelic imagery despite the posthuman orientation of the film, which is less about transcending the body and more about unifying and expanding the circuit of the mind-body.” (Just a Ghost in a Shell? Anime and Philosophy, p.37)

However this use of Christian imagery is valuable, too, as a deliberate subversion of the Christian idea of transcendence. Heaven, the movie seems to be saying, is not reached through God but through evolution towards the posthuman ideal. Whether our evolution is more about ‘transcendence’ or ‘expansion’ is debatable, but if you look at Kusanagi as the embodiment of all of humanity, the point becomes moot. This scene can be about mankind, as a whole, transcending its limited concept of ‘self’ as symbolized by Kusanagi’s shell. Furthermore, Oshii himself says:

> “I think it’s because before, people tended to think that ideology or religion were the things that actually changed people, but it’s been proven that that’s not the case. I think nowadays, technology has been proven to be the thing that’s actually changing people.” (Mamoru Oshii)

In that context, this scene makes sense--technology is taking over the spot God used to occupy before our worldwide existential crisis made us question God’s existence. In any case, it does not seem like Oshii is glorifying Christianity through the use of religious imagery, or indulging Japan’s pop-culture affinity for western symbols “because they look cool” (although that may be part of the reason!); it seems more like he is presenting these images in a subversive way. He knocks God and traditional human-centered values off the pedestal, and replaces them with a machine. Kusanagi is baptized into meaninglessness and personal freedom. All of these cues seem, again, to affirm existential and epistemological nihilism.

Finally, it’s possible that Oshii’s movies have no set meaning at all. An excerpt from the book *Stray Dog of Anime* says,

> “Angel’s Egg is known for being remarkably difficult to understand. Oshii himself has said that he does not know what the film means.” (3)

In other words, it’s possible that this entire paper is a projection of meaning onto a bunch of images that aren’t supposed to have some deep meaning beyond whatever personal significance they have to Oshii. Oshii is not the kind of director who makes movies to please his audience. In Angel’s Egg, he puts in a still shot that lasts tens of seconds and is painfully boring to watch. He uses artistic, audience-alienating touches you will never see in heavily commercial animated films. He also frequently alludes to his pet basset hounds, even though the symbolism of basset hounds is limited to Oshii’s own head. He says, “Every time I make a movie, I feed in elements to make sure that it’s *my* movie. I’m marking poles like a dog does.” One gets the sense that Oshii is committed to making movies for himself, and anyone else is free to take whatever meaning from his films that they will.

In conclusion, epistemological nihilism tells us we have to use our own judgment to create personal meaning rather than relying on so-called ‘objective meaning’. Mamoru Oshii, by denying that his films have any kind of ‘true meaning’, seems to tell us the same thing--that it’s up to us to do find out what these films mean to us. He refuses to preach, and he can neither confirm nor deny our results.

Bibliography:


