

Mythological narratives of Japanese animation: the memory of the collective unconscious in the culture of consumerism

Roman Vorobei (ORCID 0009-0000-3450-7035)
State University of Trade and Economics (Kyiv, Ukraine)

ABSTRACT

The article explores the use of mythological narratives in Japanese animation as part of collective memory in the context of consumer culture. The author analyses symbolic and archetypal images in popular animated works such as *Spirited Away*, *Gyakkyō Burai Kaiji: Ultimate Survivor*, *Death Note* and *Death Parade*, which reflect the transformation of values, the crisis of freedom and the loss of authenticity in the context of the modern consumer society. Particular attention is paid to the idea of consumption as a new religion that creates a cult of material wealth and status, and its impact on the formation of public consciousness. The article examines how Japanese animation uses ancient mythological motifs and archetypes of the collective unconscious to criticise consumerism, but at the same time these motifs are often integrated into the system of consumption, becoming part of it. The work aims to explore the dual role of mythological narratives: as a means of criticism and as an element that reproduces consumer culture, and their significance in the philosophical understanding of the modern world.

KEYWORDS

collective memory, mythology, consumerism, Japanese animation, symbolism, archetypes, hyperreality, spirituality, materialism

Introduction

Since ancient times, mythology has served as a key means of understanding reality, shaping worldviews, social order, and cultural identity. It is a universal cultural code deeply rooted in human consciousness. Contemporary cultural products, such as Japanese animation, often turn to mythological narratives to highlight current issues. One of the main types of modern socio-economic relations is consumerism, which reflects not only material aspirations but also the transformation of human values and relationships in the context of a consumer society.

Mythological narratives are not just artistic images. They are deeply rooted in the concept of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, which, according to Carl Gustav Jung, is the 'memory of humanity' that structures experience and forms the basis for understanding the fundamental truths of human existence (*Jung, 1959*). The memory of humanity, accumulated over generations, is the result of the integration of cultural, historical and mythological experience, which is stored in the form of universal symbols and archetypes. According to Jung, archetypes not only reflect collective memory, but also facilitate adaptation to new realities, helping people to order a chaotic world through symbolic narratives (*Jung, 1959*). Mythology acts as an integrative mechanism that ensures unity between the past, present and future, preserving the historical and cultural experience of humanity in generalised forms.

The cultural phenomenon of Japanese animation, with its rich narrative and symbolic structures, provides a

unique opportunity to analyze the interaction between consumerism and mythology. Through archetypes and allegories, animation not only criticizes social norms, values, and behavioral patterns, but also explores existential dilemmas and ethical challenges posed by consumer culture.

The aim of this study is to explore how Japanese animation uses mythological narratives, deeply rooted in the collective unconscious, as a lens through which to critically examine and reflect upon the phenomenon of consumerism. By focusing on individual works, the study seeks to uncover the philosophical and cultural messages embedded in these narratives, as well as to highlight the symbolic mechanisms that shape the perception of consumerism in contemporary society.

Research methods

The preliminary working hypothesis is that Japanese animation uses mythological narratives to reflect and criticize the phenomenon of consumerism through symbolic images and archetypes. The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural, philosophical, and comparative civilizational analysis.

Firstly, the structural method of Claude Lévi-Strauss is used to study the symbolic meaning of characters and plots of Japanese animation, which allows to reveal archetypal models and binary oppositions that organize narratives (*Lévi-Strauss, 1969*).

Secondly, the philosophical approach is based on Jean Baudrillard's ideas about hyperreality and simulacra (*Baudrillard, 1996*), which allows to interpret consumerism

as a system of symbols and images that supplant real experience and authenticity.

Thirdly, Joseph Campbell's hermeneutic methodology allows to consider animated works as modern mythological narratives that perform the function of integrating and comprehending chaotic reality through symbolic stories (Campbell, 2008).

The combination of these methods allows to better understand how Japanese animation forms a critique of consumerism by using mythological images and symbols, and how these narratives influence the perception of contemporary social problems.

Results and Discussion

Mythology is one of the oldest means of comprehending reality, which performs key functions in shaping worldviews, social order, and cultural identity. In his philosophy of symbolic forms, Ernst Cassirer emphasizes that myth is a fundamental form of symbolic thinking that structures human experience, giving it meaning through rituals, stories, and symbols (Cassirer, 1946). Joseph Campbell considers myths as universal stories that explain the universal truths of human existence, helping to navigate existential challenges through archetypal images and stories (Campbell, 2008). Claude Lévi-Strauss, in turn, approaches myths as structural systems that reflect deep patterns of human thinking, establishing binary oppositions (e.g., nature-culture) to organize chaotic reality (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). Mythology performs cognitive, integrative, and normative functions, shaping the human understanding of the world through the symbolic reinterpretation of chaos.

Mythological narratives play an important role in reflecting the phenomenon of consumerism, serving as metaphorical tools for criticizing social values and behavioral patterns. In many myths, consumer behavior is associated with excess, moral decline, or loss of harmony with the natural world, as seen, for example, in the myth of King Midas, whose thirst for gold led to tragic consequences. This calls for a rethinking of the ethical aspects of consumption, emphasizing the importance of a balance between the material and the spiritual (Campbell, 2008).

Consumerism, as a phenomenon of modern society, reflects the systematic formation of the ideology of consumption, where the consumer becomes the central subject of social and economic processes. Jean Baudrillard in his work "The System of Things" notes that the modern consumer society functions not only through material objects, but also through signs and symbols that create the illusion of pleasure and social status (Baudrillard, 1996). Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* emphasizes that consumption has become the basis of social reality, where imagery dominates, and society functions as a spectacle in which meaning is formed through representation rather than through actual experience (Debord, 1995). Consumerism reflects the fundamental transformation of social values and interpersonal relationships in the context of the dominance of consumer aesthetics.

Japanese consumerism can be interpreted as a form of cultural and social phenomenon that has a deep philosophical connotation related to the value of the new. Japanese consumers' fascination with new and exciting products creates a willingness to pay a high price for their acquisition. The concept of *shinhatsubai* (新発売), which translates to "new and improved, now on sale," reflects the dynamic interaction between innovation and market expectations.

The term itself, formed from the characters for "new" (新), "launch, beginning" (発) and "sale" (売), symbolizes the movement of goods in social space, giving importance to the process of renewal itself, even if the innovation is superficial. Achieving common goals by avoiding conflict and maintaining mutual respect (Hernadi, 2018). The fascination with the new and the desire to possess it, often referred to in the context of «shinhatsubai», is not only a feature of Japanese culture but also a universal human trait. However, consumerism as a system transforms this desire into a pathological neurosis that manifests itself in obsessive purchases that compensate for emotional losses (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). As Fromm notes, in the mode of possession, a person seeks to fill the existential void through material things, while true freedom lies in "being" (Fromm, 1976). Artists such as Hayao Miyazaki, Nobuyuki Fukumoto, Tsugumi Ohba and Yuzuru Tachikawa often serve as the voice of society. They criticize the relentless pursuit of material wealth, status and novelty. This pursuit, deeply embedded in the corporate work ethic, leads individuals to neglect their freedom as well as their inner lives. Ultimately, they are transformed into commodities valued solely for their market value. Marx powerfully captures this transformation when he asserts that "the worker becomes the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range". Similarly, Fromm underscores the alienation inherent in commodification, noting that "man does not sell his labour power; he sells himself and feels that he is a commodity" (Fromm, 1976: 44). It finds expression in anime, animated films, and TV series that are popular in Japan.

Miyazaki, Nobuyuki Fukumoto, Tsugumi Ohba, Yuzuru Tachikawa use mythological narratives and archetypes to convey meanings, create images that motivate the audience to take action, including purchases, by fueling their desires and playing on their emotions. In other cases, artists use this method to protest against consumer behavior. They use mythological narratives to communicate the shape of consumer society in an intuitive way and express their own position on it.

In *Spirited Away*, Hayao Miyazaki depicts the consumer society in the form of a bathhouse headed by the manager Yubaba, who has absolute power in this world and is driven by the desire for wealth. Bathhouse guests come not for physical cleansing, but for symbolic services that emphasize their status. For example, the Joyful Spirit of the Dirty River (Kaonashi) seeks to find his place in this world by using gold as a way to buy acceptance. His insatiability demonstrates how consumption becomes an end in itself, and the reaction of the bathhouse workers to his generous tips metaphorically describes people's desire for easy enrichment to satisfy their desires. Jean Baudrillard describes consumption as a process in which things cease to be functional and become symbols of status and identity. In *Spirited Away*, this is reflected through the images of the characters and the world. Chihiro's parents, voraciously consuming food that did not belong to them, transformed into pigs, which is an allegory of uncontrolled consumption. They do not evaluate food for its essence, but simply greedily consume it, which symbolizes the modern consumer society. Chihiro is the opposite of the consumer world: she does not act on the principle of benefit or status, but through compassion and connection with reality. Her relationship to the Joyful Spirit shows that the true value lies not in consumption, but in understanding and acceptance. She helps to free spirits from the deception of

materiality, returning them to authenticity. Her victory over the bathhouse consumption system symbolizes the possibility of liberation from simulacra and a return to the true essence of life. Hayao Miyazaki uses the mythical image of the Buddha to describe Chihiro's journey in *Spirited Away*. Japanese culture is deeply rooted in the traditions of Zen Buddhism, which has played a key role in shaping the Japanese worldview and art (*Suzuki, 1959*). Zen Buddhism emphasises the importance of recognising the illusory nature of the material world and of abandoning attachments that cause suffering. Junichi Ito, studying the role of religious motifs in Japanese culture, notes: "The integration of Buddhist and Shinto elements in modern Japanese narratives reflects not just spiritual beliefs, but a cultural framework that shapes moral and ethical understanding through mythological storytelling" (*Ito, 2005*). Chihiro's spiritual transformation can be seen as a path to enlightenment and liberation, reminiscent of the Buddhist path. Chihiro's entry into the spirit world can be interpreted as a penetration into *maya*, the illusion that hides the true nature of reality. In this world, people lose their true nature, their identity. In Buddhism, even the self is an illusion. For example, Yubaba controls the bathhouse not only through power, but also through control of symbols: she takes Chihiro's name and changes it to 'Sen'. Material symbols, such as the gold of the Joyful Spirit (Kaonashi), are false and do not lead to true happiness. This is in line with Erik Fromm's ideas about the 'mode of being' as opposed to the 'mode of possession' developed in *To Have or to Be?* (*Fromm, 1976*). Chihiro demonstrates behaviour consistent with the existential 'mode of being': she rejects the temptations of Kaonashi's gold, unlike the bathhouse workers who seek material goods. Her focus on human values, such as saving her friends and loving her parents, indicates a liberation from selfish desires. In the finale, after freeing Yubaba from her material dependence, Chihiro defeats the dragon like a hero with a thousand faces and returns to the human world to share the wisdom she has gained. Like the Buddha, she realises the illusory nature of the world and frees herself from attachment, showing that true happiness lies in harmony with oneself and others.

In *Gyakkyō Burai Kaiji: Ultimate Survivor*, Nobuyuki Fukumoto portrays anime as an allegory for existential choices in a consumer society and the crisis of human freedom, similar to the ideas of Eric Fromm, in particular his concepts from *Escape from Freedom* and *To Have or to Be* (*Fromm, 1976*). The conflict between "to have" and "to be" is clearly seen in the characters' motivations. In Kaiji's world, money is not just a means of subsistence, but a symbol of status, power, and even survival. Most of the characters strive to "have" - to get money, power, and control at any cost, even by betraying, deceiving, or destroying others. Kaiji, while participating in these games, embodies the ideal of "being." He often helps others even to the detriment of himself (for example, giving away his own winnings to save his comrades). His humanity and ability to empathize make him unique in a world dominated by material values. In Kaiji, the characters are confronted with a system that forces them to make choices in extremely stressful circumstances, often depriving them of their freedom. Fromm describes the mechanisms of escape from freedom-authoritarianism, destructiveness, and conformity-as ways to avoid the anxiety associated with being responsible for one's own life. The protagonist, Kaiji, is often in situations where he is forced to take risks, but he does so in an effort to preserve his humanity. Other characters,

on the contrary, either blindly obey the rules and the system (conformism) or use others for their own benefit (destructiveness). Gambling, in which Kaiji participates, is a way of manipulating freedom: formally, players are given a choice, but it is always limited by the system, which symbolizes the capitalist system. This creates the illusion of freedom that Fromm writes about, while true freedom lies in going beyond this system. "Kaiji" demonstrates the tragedy of modern society, where the desire to 'have' destroys the elements of 'to be', leading to dehumanization and alienation. Kaiji's entry into the world of gambling reflects the classic mythological "call to adventure". Like mythological heroes, he embarks on a journey of survival and self-discovery, motivated by financial desperation. *Gyakkyō Burai Kaiji: Ultimate Survivor* is a David and Goliath story where Kaiji is pitted against Tanagawa, a gifted, strong opponent. Calling on God's help, Kaiji, like David, defeats the arrogant Tanagawa. However, the final evil is not defeated, Kazutaka Hyōdō, the image of Satan, the manager of this world, a man of absolute evil and power, defeats Kaiji, shattering his dreams of freedom from the world of consumption.

In *Death Note*, Tsugumi Ohba describes the protagonist Light Yagami's fatigue with the consumerist world he lives in. Light receives the Death Note, a mythical universal weapon, and begins to pass judgment on everyone he considers guilty. Society invents the myth of Kira, an avenger for all those powerless against the system. Kira, created by Light, is a simulacrum. He is not a real person, but an image, a myth that is spread by society through the media. Society begins to react not to reality, to Light's actions as an individual, but to the image of Kira he created, which takes on a life of its own and becomes part of the collective consciousness. Jean Baudrillard argues that in the modern world, reality dissolves into hyperreality, where simulacra replace reality (*Baudrillard, 1995*). Hyperreality is a state in which simulations become more real than reality itself. Light himself becomes a hostage of this hyperreality. The feeling that he is a deity is a consequence of his belief in the simulacrum he has created. Thus, the real Light disappears behind the image of "Kira", which functions in the symbolic field of society. *Death Note* reflects the archetype of the Faustian bargain, when a mortal gains extraordinary power at the cost of his humanity. In consumerist terms, it reflects the trade-off between ambition and moral compromise, where people sacrifice personal values for material gain or control. Ryuk and the other shinigami represent detached, almost capitalistic entities that introduce *Death Note* into the human world for entertainment, just as consumer markets introduce destructive products under the guise of utility or pleasure. Their indifference mirrors the systemic apathy of consumerist structures that place profits above human consequences.

Light's self-proclaimed role as Kira, the judge of humanity, is reminiscent of mythological tales of deities and kings with absolute power. Like how Shiva, the god of destruction and renewal, decides to die in order to maintain balance in the world. Light also sees himself as the one who destroys "evil" in order to create a "new order." However, unlike the divine figures who seek justice and balance, Light's judgment is tainted by ego and personal vendettas.

In *Death Parade*, Yuzuru Tachikawa depicts a trial of the souls of the dead. The fate of people is decided in a game that cannot be refused. The game is played in order to assess the true values of a person, whether his or her soul is pure in its desires, or whether it is occupied with the

desire for wealth and consumption. The game itself, which involves souls, is a hyper-reality: an artificially created situation that does not reflect the true nature of the players, but exposes their emotions, fears, and instincts in the form of a simulation. This illustrates Jean Baudrillard's thesis that hyperreality replaces reality: the trial creates a false context, but it is this context that becomes decisive in determining the fate of the characters. The process of arbitration in *Death Parade* reflects the mythological practices of King Minos, one of the three judges of the underworld in Greek mythology, who, after his death, was given the role of determining the fate of the souls of the dead. His task was to decide whether the soul would go to Elysium (paradise), Tartarus (hell), or the fields of Asphodel (neutral state). Denim, the main character of *Death Parade*, like Minos, had absolute power in his judgment, and his decisions were not subject to appeal.

The consumerist ideology that dominates modern society is actually creating a new cult that takes on the characteristics of a religion. Consumption has a religious character, as it is based on obsession, symbolic rituals and the desire for material 'salvation'. As Baudrillard notes, things cease to be functional objects and become symbols of status, identity and social significance, similar to sacred objects in religious cults (Baudrillard, 1996). This religion of consumption creates its own Golden Calf - a cult of novelty, wealth and status that people strive to achieve, often at the expense of true authenticity and freedom.

The use of ancient mythological imagery, which is often used in Japanese animation to critique consumerism, also becomes part of this cultural context. These images, as in *Spirited Away* or *Death Parade*, not only criticise the ideology of consumption, but are incorporated into it, becoming elements of a commercial product, becoming part of the consumerist order and not fundamentally changing the anti-humanist system itself.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be argued that Japanese animation uses mythological narratives as a means of reflecting on the phenomenon of consumerism, combining criticism of social norms with the search for deeper philosophical meanings. Through symbolic images and archetypes, these works explore the complex ethical challenges associated with consumer culture, such as the transformation of values, dehumanization, and alienation of the individual.

Japanese animation emphasizes the duality of the phenomenon of consumerism: on the one hand, it is the desire for material enrichment, status and power; on the other

hand, it is the loss of authenticity, the destruction of spiritual foundations and dependence on illusions. This approach allows us to critically rethink consumerism not only as a socio-economic phenomenon, but also as a philosophical problem that affects human existence.

In further research, it is advisable to compare the peculiarities of consumerism in Japanese animation with other art forms, as well as to study the influence of the cultural context on the creation of mythological allegories. Of particular interest is the analysis of how similar narratives in other cultures allow us to rethink the global problems of consumerism and propose alternative approaches to their solution.

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Міфологічні наративи японської анімації: пам'ять колективного несвідомого у культурі консюмеризму

Роман Воробей (ORCID 0009-0000-3450-7035)

Державний торговельно-економічний університет (Київ, Україна)

У статті досліджується використання міфологічних наративів у японській анімації як частини колективної пам'яті в контексті культури споживання. Автор аналізує символічні та архетипічні образи в популярних анімаційних творах, таких як *Spirited Away*, *Gyakkyō Burai Kaiji: Ultimate Survivor*, *Death Note* та *Death Parade*, які відображають трансформацію цінностей, кризу свободи та втрату автентичності у контексті сучасного споживацького суспільства. Особлива увага приділяється ідеї споживання як нової релігії, що створює культ матеріального багатства та

статусу, та її впливу на формування суспільної свідомості. У статті розглядається, як японська анімація використовує стародавні міфологічні мотиви та архетипи колективного несвідомого для критики консюмеризму, але водночас ці мотиви часто інтегруються у систему споживання, стаючи її частиною. Робота спрямована на дослідження подвійної ролі міфологічних наративів: як засобу критики і як елемента, що відтворює споживацьку культуру, та їхнього значення у філософському осмисленні сучасного світу.

Ключові слова: колективна пам'ять, міфологія, консюмеризм, японська анімація, символіка, архетипи, гіперреальність, духовність, матеріалізм.

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