

Artículo / Article

Sekai-kei: Crisis, Hopelessness, and Apathy after the Japanese Economic Bubble¹.

*Sekai-kei: Crisis, Desesperanza y Apatía tras la Burbuja Económica Japonesa.***Jaime Romero Leo**

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**Abstract**

This paper will analyze the concept of *sekai-kei* [セカイ系] in the context of Japanese science fiction, which appeared in the early 2000s. *Sekai-kei* refers to an intimate, emotional, and pessimistic kind of stories whose referent was *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). This type of introspective stories had a deep impact in Western countries, where the film of Anno Hideaki quickly gained a cult following. The objective of this paper is to explore the etymological origin of this concept and provide a number of historical reasons for its emergence at the beginning of the 21st century. The first time that the Japanese started to use the word *sekai-kei* in Japan was in online discourse through internet forums, so it should be noted that, before the concept was debated in an academic context, it was teenagers and fans who gave meaning to the word. All these aspects were taken into account by Azuma Hiroki and Kasai Kiyoshi when analyzing this type of science fiction.

Keywords*Sekai-kei, Dystopia, Economic Bubble, Science Fiction, Evangelion***Resumen**

Este artículo analiza el concepto de *sekai-kei* [セカイ系] en el contexto de la ciencia ficción japonesa a comienzos del 2000. *Sekai-kei* se refiere a un tipo de historias íntimas, emotivas y pesimistas cuyo referente fue *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). Este tipo de historias introspectivas tuvieron un profundo impacto en los países occidentales, donde la película de Anno Hideaki rápidamente ganó un seguimiento de culto. El objetivo de este artículo es explorar el origen etimológico de este concepto y proporcionar una serie de razones históricas para su surgimiento a principios del siglo XXI. La primera vez que los japoneses comenzaron a usar la palabra *sekai-kei* fue en los foros de internet, por lo que debe tenerse en cuenta que, antes de que el concepto se debatiera en un contexto académico, fueron los adolescentes y los fans del manga y el anime quienes le dieron significado. Todos estos aspectos fueron tomados en cuenta por Azuma Hiroki y Kasai Kiyoshi a la hora de analizar este tipo de ciencia ficción.

Keywords*Sekai-kei, Distopía, Burbuja económica, Ciencia Ficción, Evangelion*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the Science Fiction anime of the late 1990s and the beginning of 21st century, certain titles, despite achieving notable international success, disconcerted and shocked a large part of Western audiences. Undoubtedly, the benchmark of that time, and whose influence remains latent even today, was *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, created by the Gainax studio and directed by Anno Hideaki in 1995. *Evangelion* was a turning point for the *mecha* genre in particular and Japanese Science Fiction in general, and marked the beginning of what began to be known as *sekai-kei* [セカイ系] among internet forums and Japanese cultural critics in those years.²

While in the West, dystopian stories are usually told by young people or adults, in the context of *sekai-kei* dystopia, it is children/teenagers (usually in their secondary school years) who are called upon to confront the threat in question. In this type of story, moreover, despite the dystopian context in which the world is plunged, on a day-to-day level, life goes on with an astonishing normality. There is a considerable contrast between scenes of everyday life—such as those in which the protagonist attends high school—and the apocalyptic context that surrounds the story. All of this is usually tinged with a melancholic, if not outright depressive, aura in which the protagonists are immersed. The soundtrack, the plot and the internal monologues of the young characters reinforce a sense of gloom, nostalgia, and constant introspection (Villa, 2015, pp. 280-291; Hoffer, 2021, pp. 85-86). Among these elements, the most representative of the *sekai-kei* dystopia is the protagonist's affective relationships with a character or group of characters, always framed within the melancholic context described above.

In view of the scarce bibliography on *sekai-kei* dystopia in English, this article provides a definition of the genre and a description of some of its most representative characteristics. This is followed by a historical review of some of the events that took place in Japan at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century in order to situate and understand the reasons that led to the appearance of *sekai-kei*. To carry out this analysis, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*—the catalyst and driving force behind *sekai-kei*—will be examined in particular, while several other anime from recent years will be discussed at the end of the paper.

2. SEKAI-KEI: DYSTOPIA AND INTROSPECTION

The main peculiarity of this type of dystopia—and the source of the strangeness it produces for viewers not fully familiar with *sekai-kei*—is the direct and narratively unnatural connection between the protagonist's personal and sentimental relationships and the dystopian context in which the story is set, with no fracture or "space in between" the two spheres (Tanaka, 2013). In this sense, in titles such as the aforementioned *Evangelion*, a direct jump is established between the sentimental landscapes of the protagonists and the oppressive, suffocating and, in short, apocalyptic atmosphere in which the world is plunged. There is no space between the two, in which to clearly and precisely explain or contextualize not only what is happening, but also why it is happening, or how the rest of society is experiencing the dystopia in question. Along these lines, the philosopher Azuma Hiroki gives a categorical definition, shared by other authors such as Kasai Kiyoshi (2009, p. 21), which helps to concretize the *sekai-kei* concept:

2 The concept is formed by the word "world", written in the katakana syllabary, and the Chinese ideogram *kei*, translatable as "related to" and suggesting senses such as "system", "connection" and even "kinship" (Azuma, 2001/2009, p. 124).



It is generally understood as an imaginary that links human relations between the protagonist and (usually) his or her romantic partner directly to broader, abstract issues such as "the crisis of the world" or "the end of the world", without any middle ground such as society or the state (Azuma, 2013, p. 14).

These characteristics led to the creation of a type of science fiction with a markedly introspective and sentimental character, in which the psychological world of the characters, the traumas and problems they carry with them, come to take precedence over the external threat in question: an alien invasion, the outbreak of a world war, and so on. In this context, the very etymology of the term *sekai-kei* is revealing. As Maejima (2010) has noted, despite definitions such as Azuma's, there is no consensus among critics and scholars of the medium as to what *sekai-kei* is. Azuma (2013, p. 14) himself acknowledges the apparent lack of clarity surrounding the concept before attempting to describe it.³ What can be stated with certainty is that the concept emerged in the early 2000s in Japanese blogs and forums, following the major impact of the aforementioned *Neon Genesis Evangelion* series (Maejima, 2010, p. 27), and that the meaning initially attributed to the term was intrinsic to a critical and ironic stance.⁴ As Azuma points out:

Sekai-kei, as it is often called, only depicts the small everyday world of its characters and their abstract ideas about the world and death, but rarely reflects the complex social reality in which they are immersed. They are not considered necessary. Details about what kind of aliens are attacking, how humanity responds to them and why the world is being destroyed are surprisingly neglected (Azuma, 2013, p. 14).

Precisely this leap from the space in between, which leaves descriptions of the society under threat in the background or omits them altogether, caused a certain strangeness among Western viewers at the beginning of the 21st century, who were not accustomed to such an intimate dystopia. The lack of concrete explanations and clear, detailed descriptions motivating the emergence of the dystopian context has led, in the case of *Evangelion*, to the appearance of collective works produced by fans and followers of the saga, such as *Evangelion: Análisis y Explicación* (Turpín, 2013). These works compile various forms of indirect data drawn from the series and films, interviews with the creators, and theories circulating on internet forums, among other sources, in order to construct a coherent framework for a world that is never fully explained. Considering this lack of prominence of the general dystopian context the world is set in, as opposed to the internal traumas and emotional relationships between the protagonists, it can be understood why the concept used for *sekai-kei* [セカイ系] was not that of "World" (usually written in Chinese ideograms, 世界), but "world" (written in katakana, セカイ).⁵ Thus, the connection or *kei* [系] that this type of dystopia expressed was not with the World in its broad sense, but with the small, private, everyday world of affective relationships that made up the lives of the protagonists. As the world descended into cataclysmic chaos, these titles focused on the turbulent relationship between the protagonist and a family member, a friend or the person they were in love with. In Napier's words:

- 3 In addition to Azuma, Maejima and Kasai, these discussions were joined by authors such as Okada Toshio, Saitō Tamaki, Sasaki Atsushi, Uno Tsunehiro and others.
- 4 The first to popularize the term was the Purunie Bookmark portal, where on 31 October 2002 it opened a thread entitled "What is *Sekai-kei* after all" (*Sekai-keitte kekkyoku nan nayono*).
- 5 The Japanese language is composed of three writing systems: The Chinese characters or kanji and two syllabaries, hiragana and katakana. Traditionally, the katakana system is used to transcribe concepts and words whose origin comes from abroad, especially from the West. Over time, its use has gained a certain air of cool revered by young people, who use this syllabary to write colloquial and everyday Japanese expressions. This sense of *cool* can also be related to a certain childish, light-hearted, unserious or minor sense. It is from here that the "burlesque" or critical meaning of using "world" (セカイ) instead of "World" 世界 should be understood.

Contrary to more typical action-oriented works, therefore, much of the real action in *Evangelion* is psychological. Thus, despite the requisite and truly chilling scenes of combat with the Angels, the series also contains a greater number of scenes in which the characters bicker and insult each other or else engage in intense brooding about their angst-ridden childhoods and their equally dysfunctional and disappointing parents. Far from being potential young heroes, each character is burdened by the memory of such transgressive episodes as parental abandonment and sexual betrayal. As critic Arai Hiroyuki summarizes, they are "all traumatized, lacking, hypersensitive individuals" (Napier, 2001, p. 267).

This focus on "overwhelm," "trauma," or "hypersensitivity" as manifested by characters in such dystopian narratives—prevailing over concerns about the future of society or even the survival of humanity—points to a quasi-solipsistic individualism that isolates them from others (or at least from those outside the small group of people with whom the protagonist maintains affective relationships) and can be directly linked to the international consolidation of the capitalist way of life (Walker, 2009, p. 8). As Martorell points out, it is no coincidence that in those same years of the definitive rise of global neoliberalism, there was a boom in contemporary dystopias in film, literature, comics and anime:

At the end of the Second World War, and with totalitarianism, atomic bombs, genocide, the Gulag and state violence at the forefront of the discussion, it was already dystopia—not utopia—, which had taken centre stage (...) We must not lose sight of the fact that dystopias won quantitatively and qualitatively by a landslide at the same time that late capitalism, supported by emerging computer technologies, commanded the leap from national markets to the global market, from the industrial economy to the financial economy, from social democracy to neoliberalism—transformations that marked the transition from modernity to postmodernity (Martorell, 2021, p. 34).

It is worth recalling how Japan, after its unconditional surrender following the Pacific War in 1945, was radically penetrated by the capitalist system imposed by the Americans. Its roots were already evident in the 1960s and 1970s, but especially in the 1980s, when Japan—having become the world's second economic power behind its new cultural father, the United States—presented itself to the world as a kind of reflection of the American model (Rodao, 2019). For years, many voices have been critical of this model and the traumas brought about by the assumption of the fierce neoliberalism that accompanied it.⁶ In 2005, for example, the acclaimed contemporary artist Murakami Takashi, in the framework of his exhibition *Little Boy*, stated:

Everyone who lives in Japan knows - something is wrong [...] Regardless of winning or losing the war, the bottom line is that for the past sixty years, Japan has been a testing ground for an American-style capitalist economy, protected in a greenhouse, nurtured and bloated to the point of explosion. The results are so bizarre, they are perfect. Whatever true intentions underlie "Little Boy", the nickname for Hiroshima's atomic bomb, we Japanese are truly, deeply, pampered children. And as pampered children, we throw constant tantrums while enthralled by our own cuteness (Murakami, 2005, p. 141).

⁶ In Japan this is a complex debate as such criticism can sometimes come from the left, which is in full decline within the Japanese political system, but also from the right, nostalgic for an imperial anti-capitalist past.

The quote allows for multiple readings: "testing ground of capitalism" reflects the allegiance to the United States, while "Japan as a nation swollen to bursting" refers to the traumatic causes of the bubble economy boom in the late 1980s. The latter element, especially the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble in 1989, is one of the most important events to be taken into account in understanding why Japan generated a kind of intimate dystopia such as *sekai-kei*.

Martorell explains the importance of understanding the successive crises (2008), attacks (2001) and similar episodes in the recent history of the West in order to understand the current rise of dystopias, as well as their characteristics. In this way, this author's *Contra la distopía* stands as a fundamental text for contextualizing and critically approaching the contemporary dystopian narrative. However, his study, which focuses on European and North American drifts, leaves out East Asia and, in particular, Japan. What is interesting is that Martorell's analysis can be extrapolated to the Japanese archipelago, whose westernization since the mid-nineteenth century has, for the last two centuries, turned it into a kind of close Asian relative of Western political and social models.⁷ This historical peculiarity means that certain approaches, such as those developed in *Contra la Distopía*, are operative when it comes to understanding contemporary Japan and its dystopian literary and audiovisual production. Despite this, some qualifications must be made, since the traumatic events in which Japan was immersed, in addition to preceding to those suffered by Europe and America, had certain particularities which, taken on board by Japanese idiosyncrasy, led to "strange" currents within Japanese popular culture, such as the aforementioned *sekai-kei* dystopia.

3. CRISIS AND HOPELESSNESS: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

As mentioned above, *sekai-kei* storytelling became popular after the broadcast of *Evangelion* in 1995.⁸ In the same year, two tragic events in recent Japanese history took place: the Great Kobe Earthquake, measuring 6.9 on the Mw scale, the largest to date after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923; and the sarin gas terrorist attack on the Tokyo underground by the Aum Shinrikyō sect (Murakami, 1997/2014).⁹ According to Tanaka (2013), these events had a decisive impact on the public's perception of their community environment, as unsafe and unreliable.

However, the deterioration of trust in society was not only related to these isolated events. Until the late 1980s, Japan was mired in the context of the Cold War, which, due to the geographical location of the archipelago and its alliance with the United States, was indeed complex and delicate. As the authors from the Genkai Shōsetsu Kenkyūkai (2010, pp. 9-10)¹⁰ note, this war context had a tangible impact on the light novels, manga and anime that began to develop from the 1990s onwards. With the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 in the United States, the old imaginary of warfare between the two blocks suddenly changed to that of "World Civil War", which generated a greater sense of helplessness and fear among Japanese society, heightened by the recent memory of the attack perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyō (Genkai Shōsetsu Kenkyūkai, 2010, p. 11).

7 From the beginning of the Meiji period, in 1868, Japan undertook a process of self-westernisation to position itself economically and militarily on par with the European powers which, at the time, were in the throes of colonial expansion in East Asia. The aim was to avoid being colonised by achieving the same status as the colonial powers as quickly as possible.

8 It is no coincidence that some authors such as Okada Toshio used the designation "post-*Evangelion* syndrome" to refer to *Sekai-kei*.

9 The Aum Shinrikyō sect carried out a series of coordinated sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo underground, killing thirteen people and injuring hundreds. The attack sent shockwaves through Japanese society, which is used to dealing with devastating phenomena such as natural disasters, but not with such terrorist acts.

10 Genkai Shōsetsu Kenkyūkai is composed of Kiyoshi Kasai, Kentaro Komori, Ichishi Lida, Yutaka Ebihara, Akira Okawada, Nobuhiro Tsubasa, Naoya Fujita, Daisuke Watsumi and Satoshi Shirai.

In the economic sphere, the 1990s were marked by the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble in 1989. Japan went from presenting itself to the world as the flamboyant and powerful second world economy, feared even by the United States, to falling into a deep crisis, the effects of which were not long in coming (Rodao, 2019). The recession ushered in an era of hiring freezes and downsizing that was suffered by what in Japan was called "the lost generation": graduates and university graduates who earned their degrees between about 1993 and 2003 and were forced to settle for part-time, low-skilled jobs, low wages and, ultimately, minimal job security.

As can be seen, Japan joined the ranks of the global crisis that was to befall Europe and America years later, before any other so-called first-world nation. It did so, moreover, dragging behind it certain previous traumas that were intertwined with international events and crises. All these events led to a kind of introspection on the part of the population, which showed a palpable disenchantment and loss of confidence in the community. Added to this, was one of the elements that Martorell points out as crucial when it comes to understanding the boom that dystopian narratives have been enjoying over the last few decades: the lack of political alternatives.

The current preponderance of dystopia converges with the absence of alternatives to capitalism (...) Skillfully hijacked by the neoliberal establishment, the collapse of the Berlin Wall allowed the slogan "There is no alternative" to shape the collective consciousness (...) That slogan gradually became more intransigent. The updated version no longer asserts that capitalism embodies the best possible system, but the only possible system (Martorell, 2021, p. 39).

This sense of a lack of alternatives had taken hold in Japan long before the final setback to the socialist project with the fall of the Berlin Wall. While left-wing student movements played a significant role in the anti-Anpo protests of 1960¹¹ and the zenkyōtō movement of 1967¹² (Oguma, 2018, pp. 2-7), police efforts and the economic boom the country was beginning to embark on meant that the initial momentum of the latter protests, and along with them the barricades at the universities, were gradually dismantled. The economy was growing in those years, and the general population of the country was satisfied with its standard of living. Gradually, this belligerent and protesting impulse against the prevailing system faded away.

In Europe, authors such as Michel Clouscard were deeply critical at the time of May '68 and its intellectual leaders. According to Clouscard (1973/2019, p. 17), that year witnessed the last gesture of the left's obeisance to neoliberalism, in which the management of the economy was ceded to it definitively and without reply. Thus, according to the French philosopher, one could speak of the transition from the famous slogan that was the standard-bearer during the protests: "Be realistic, demand the impossible" to one that reflects the panorama that resulted from all that: "Everything is permitted, but nothing is possible" (Clouscard, 1973/2019, p. 158). Years later, following the French philosopher's predictions and linking with the slogan of the early 1990s of "there is no alternative", Fredric Jameson would sum up the issue with his famous and discouraging statement: "today it seems

11 The "US-Japan Security Treaty" of 1960 was the ratification of the collaboration treaty with the United States signed in 1951, after the defeat in World War II, which, among other things, allowed America to maintain its military bases and territories ceded for such bases on Japanese soil in exchange for military security.

12 The zenkyōtō [university councils of joint struggle], fueled by the recent memory of the Anpo front protests, opposition to the Vietnam War and, in general, by the belligerent spirit of what Oguma calls "Japanese '68", initiated a series of protests and revolts that culminated in the seizure and lockdown of some of the country's major universities. The goals of the zenkyōtō movement were difficult to achieve. Initially, when the movement was limited to Nihon University and the University of Tokyo, the zenkyōtō were formed as separate groups specific to each university, that is, each university had its own zenkyōtō and they were not yet connected to each other. At this early stage, most students were not interested in national and international politics, but the aim of their activism was to improve the situation within their own universities. As the movement spread to more universities, several New Left groups tried to build on it with more concrete political proposals, such as direct opposition to the conservative Japanese government.

easier for us to imagine the total deterioration of the earth and of nature than the collapse of capitalism" (Jameson, 1994/2000, p. 41).

Despite Clouscard's pessimism about the future that awaited the France of his time, no other country saw such a rapid and drastic collapse of the leftist alternative as Japan. Japan's 1968 can thus be seen as the last sign of citizen movements and activism in the truest sense of the word. From then on, Japan, governed almost continuously since the post-war period by the same party, the Liberal Democratic Party, showed signs of a youth increasingly depoliticized and unconcerned with the political direction of the nation.

If we take into account this breeding ground of successive crises, attacks, political defeats, and, in short, the lack of certainty and prosperity to look towards, we can understand why Japan has been one of the most fertile grounds for the development of dystopian stories in recent years. However, in contrast to these sublime and grandiloquent stories—familiar to Western audiences as well—which depict destruction, decadence and apocalypse in a spectacular, eye-catching way, full of action and fast-paced horror, a *rara avis* such as the *sekai-kei* appeared. This genre reflected a Japan closed in on itself, nostalgic, taciturn, hypersensitive, and tired; all adjectives that the protagonists of this dystopian genre display.

On this basis, and in order to narrow down the term even further by trying to relate it to other more familiar Japanese concepts, we propose here the categorization of *sekai-kei* as a kind of "*hikikomori* dystopia". The term is nowadays directly related to the field of psychology, being used to designate a disorder whose origin would have taken place in contemporary Japan:

Hikikomori is a disorder characterized by asocial and avoidant behavior that leads to withdrawal from society. The disorder primarily affects adolescents or young people who isolate themselves from the world, locking themselves in their parents' rooms for an indefinite period of time, which can last for years. They reject any kind of communication and their life begins to revolve around the use of the Internet and new technologies. Such a phenomenon has emerged in many places with contemporary socio-economic environments, including a rigid educational system, irregular employment opportunities and widespread use of the internet (...) Population studies indicate that it is particularly prevalent in Japan, related to the hermetic nature of traditional Japanese society and the emphasis that this youth social isolation syndrome (*hikikomori*) places on loneliness. It has even been hypothesized to be a "culture-bound syndrome" (De la Calle and Muñoz, 2018, pp. 115-116).

This proposed relationship does not argue that the protagonists of *sekai-kei* or those who enjoy this dystopian genre are *hikikomori*. The term "*hikikomori* dystopia" that I propose here is used as a way of referring to the confinement and self-absorption that this disorder, of Japanese origin, leads to. *Hikikomori* disorder is also commonly associated to the intense pressures of the Japanese way of life, which subject citizens to such stress that they respond by "surrendering" to the adversities of everyday life—withdrawing into themselves and cutting all ties with everything outside the room in which they seclude themselves. In other words, all these patterns are reminiscent of the definitions proposed by Azuma or Maejima when discussing the peculiarities of the *sekai-kei* genre. The term *hikikomori* was popularized by the psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki in his book *Syakaiteki hikikomori* [Socially *Hikikomori*], published in 1998, precisely the same time when the *sekai-kei* genre began to consolidate (Koshiba, 2007, p. 96). It can thus be said that, in a way, although from different spheres, both phenomena, *sekai-kei* dystopia and *hikikomori* disorder, were expressions of, and reactions to, the pressures of a shared social context.

In order to give some examples beyond *Evangelion*, the following are some of the anime titles that belong to the dystopian Sekai-kei genre.

4. REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLES OF SEKAI-KEI FICTIONS

Voices of a Distant Star [Hoshi no koe], the short film directed by Shinkai Makoto in 2002, is one of the paradigmatic examples of the peculiar *sekai-kei* dystopia. The film is set in the year 2046 and tells the story of the friendship between Noboru Terao and Mikako Nagamine, close friends who are soon to graduate from high school. After an alien attack on Earth, Mikako is selected to pilot one of the *mecha* of the United Nations Armed Forces expedition that will retaliate against the aliens. Separated, Noboru and Mikako try to keep in touch by sending messages to each other on their mobile phones. However, as the expedition moves further away from Earth, the time it takes to receive the messages increases substantially. In the end, it takes eight years for the messages to reach their destination, but Noboru is still waiting for Mikako's return. The plot of *Voices of a Distant Star* focuses exclusively on the bond between the two young people, leaving aside any description of the reason for and development of the armed conflict. Mikako's reflection at the beginning of the film is symptomatic: "There is a word... 'World'. Until I got to high school I never wondered about its real meaning: the area where the messages on my mobile phone were coming from. But why now can't I reach anyone with my mobile phone (...) I feel lonely". As can be seen, this type of reflection, accompanied by plots such as the one described, involves a radical solipsism, in which the borders of the 'world' [せかい] are limited to what the protagonist feels and thinks, despite the complex panorama—here, the beginning of a war with another planet—in which the events unfold.

The same patterns are repeated in *She, the Ultimate Weapon* [Saishū Heiki Kanojo], a 13-episode anime also released in 2002 and based on the manga of the same name by Takahashi Shin (Kase, 2002). Like *Voices of a Distant Star* or *Evangelion*, the plot is set in a war context, at the beginning of World War III. However, the work focuses on the love story of two third-year high school students, Chise and Shuji, who live in a peaceful Japanese town on the island of Hokkaidō, close to the capital Sapporo, where everyday life continues as usual. The central theme of the love affair remains even as Chise reveals her hidden secret: she is Japan's Ultimate Weapon for victory in war, a human-machine hybrid whose destructive capacity is only curbed by the latent humanity that remains in her and is fueled by her love affair with Shuji (Birmingham, 2021, pp. 138-139). By the end of the plot, all of humanity is destroyed as a result of the war and Chise's destructive power—everyone except Shuji. The anime culminates in a final monologue by the young man: "I interpreted the roar of the world being destroyed as if it were Chise's heartbeat. It was as if our voices and the voices of the whole world had joined together to perform one last song, a song of love. We will love, we will live" (Kase, 2002). It is once again clear how, in the face of the devastation of the "World" [世界], the crucial thing in these stories is the "world" [せかい].

It is worth noting that *She, the Ultimate Weapon* belongs to the genre known as moe-military animation, in which the protagonists—cute girls (*bishōjo*) with *kawaii* and *moe* aesthetics—are depicted wielding weapons or embodying war machinery. In this sense, there is a clear connection between moe-military anime and *sekai-kei* narratives. A prominent example is the *Kantai Collection* franchise. *Kantai Collection* began as a free online card game developed by Kadokawa Games and released by DMM Games for PC in 2013. Over the years, that game has expanded into anime, light novels, resin figures, manga, and more, broadening its universe through various media. In the anime, Japan is suddenly attacked by an enemy fleet emerging from the depths of the sea. The origin of this fleet and the motives behind the attack are unknown, but the *kan-musume*—young girls who embody both the soul and the technology of Japanese warships (ranging from modern vessels to those used during the Second

World War)—are called upon to defend Japan (Romero-Leo, 2025, p. 166). The war scenes are intertwined with everyday life moments experienced by the girls at the military base, where they go to cafés, go shopping, participate in group activities, cook, and spend their free time on various hobbies. Additionally, the anime includes a kind of competition among some of the ship-girls to win the Admiral's affection.

Another title often cited as representative of *sekai-kei* is the animated film *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* [Kumo no Mukō, Yakusoku no Basho], directed by Shinkai Makoto in 2004. The film's narrative backdrop is an alternate-history Japan, two decades after World War II, jointly occupied by the USSR in the north and the United States in the south. The northern government, known as the Union, controls the island of Hokkaidō, while the Alliance rules the rest of present-day Japan. For the inhabitants of the Alliance, Ezo (as Hokkaidō is called) is presented as a place of mystery, scientific experimentation, and technological development, while the Union is portrayed as a closed and enigmatic society, barely represented throughout the film. In this context, this time of cold war, we are introduced to three high school students in what would be the province of modern-day Aomori, the northern part of the island of Honshū, a few kilometers from Hokkaidō: friends Fujisawa Hiroki and Shirakawa Takuya, and their classmate, Sawatari Sayuri, with whom both boys are in love. Fascinated by the imposing Ezo Tower, which stretches for miles into the sky and can be seen from anywhere in Japan, Hiroki and Takuya spend their free time building a small plane to cross the Tsugaru Strait and reach the tower. Sayuri, upon discovering their plan, becomes a third member of the group and promises that one day they will reach the mysterious place together.

Several years later, the narrative reintroduces the protagonists: Hiroki is a depressed student in Tokyo, living alone and longing to remember his love for Sayuri. Takuya has become a military scientist at Aomori Army College, tasked with investigating the strange effects of the tower on Ezo, and the parallel universes it generates around it. Sayuri, for reasons not clearly explained, has fallen into a comma, directly linked to the tower and its mysterious effects. When Hiroki learns of Sayuri's condition and her connection to Ezo, he plans to take her in the plane they left half-built as youngsters, aiming to reach the Tower, the "promised place", assuming that contact with the tower will somehow awaken her. Takuya, also involved in the guerrilla reunification movement known as the Uilta Liberation Front, convinces Hiroki to fly his childhood plane, taking Sayuri to the Tower, now understood to be a Union weapon, and destroy it with a single missile. On the eve of the war between North and South, Hiroki fulfils his mission, revives Sayuri and destroys the Tower in Ezo. At the end of the film, in a similar vein to *She, the Ultimate Weapon* over the destruction of the tower, Sayuri's monologue about her feelings for Hiroki and her wishes for him prevails over the destruction of the tower.

Undoubtedly, this approach to dystopia—coming from a perspective completely different from what we are accustomed to, in which action plays a wholly secondary role to the psychological world of the characters—is a novelty within the genre, regardless of the quality of its productions. Paying attention to the factors that promoted the emergence of *sekai-kei* allows us to recognize how much dystopian currents are shaped by the historical and social context surrounding their creators. In the specific case of this genre, it offers an opportunity to reflect on some of the changes and traumas that Japan experienced at the end of the 20th century. As Azuma states: "it does not necessarily mean that for me they are excellent and novel works, but that the environment in which they were created is astonishing" (2013, p.15).

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