

Research on the Narrative Characteristics of Sekai-kei Anime

Ye Lv¹ Hongya Zhou²

^{1,2} Xihua University, Chengdu 610039, China

² Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao 999078, China

²Corresponding author. Email: zhy@mail.xhu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Japanese animation has exerted a remarkable global influence with its distinctive cultural export strength, maintaining a unique position in both artistic and commercial aspects, and establishing an independent animation art system as well as an innovative and cutting-edge narrative cultural form. Taking Japanese Sekai-kei anime as the primary research subject, this study explores its narrative design features, analyzes and summarizes the narrative elements and expressive styles through which Sekai-kei anime reflects social reality via characters' psychology, further comprehends the narrative expression structure as well as cross-cultural design and communication strategies of Japanese animation, and thus provides more diversified development paths for animation art in terms of themes and narrative logic.

Keywords: *Sekai-kei Anime, Japanese animation, Animation narrative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a form of mass cultural medium, animation profoundly reflects social psychology and the spirit of the times. Currently, the narrative focus of global animation has generally shifted from grand historical narratives to the exploration of individual emotional experiences. Against this backdrop, Japanese "Sekai-kei" animation has emerged as a representative genre by virtue of its narrative structure featuring a direct "individual-world" connection, resonating with audiences worldwide. This paper primarily draws on Tzvetan Todorov's narratological theories to conduct a study on the narrative characteristics of Sekai-kei animation.

2. THE NARRATIVE LOGIC OF SEKAI-KEI ANIME

The term "Sekai-kei" emerged online in 2002, referring to a genre of works represented by *Neon Genesis Evangelion (EVA)*, which aired from 1995 to 1996. In *EVA*, the teenage protagonist Shinji Ikari is forced to pilot Eva Unit-01 to combat the Angels and save the world. The survival of the world hinges on his personal will and choices, a trait that has since become a defining hallmark of

this genre. Hiroki Azuma, a Japanese scholar of postmodern theory, defined Sekai-kei as "the imagination that directly links the tiny relationship between you and me to grand ontological issues such as the survival of the world, bypassing intermediate elements like society and the nation". This definition has been widely accepted[1]. Ken Maeshima, a Japanese critic, also identified in his work *Sekaikei to wa nani ka* that EVA-style works featuring intense monologues from a single protagonist fall within the scope of Sekai-kei[2]. It can be stated that the core characteristics of Sekai-kei works include tying the fate of the world to individual consciousness, omitting depictions of social structures and operational groups, and reflecting the inner spiritual world of the protagonist group through the construction of time-space imagery.

In Sekai-kei works, the term "world" carries a special connotation, referring to a highly subjectivized imaginary space. It is often confined to the localized environment of the characters or a symbolic domain infused with their emotions, and functions as a direct interface with individuals. Typically, the "world" is divided into two layers: first, the "small world" closely connected to the protagonist's emotions, which forms a "petit récit"

perspective aligned with individual experience through delicate depictions of daily fragments, private emotions, and micro-interactions; second, the "big world" that serves as the source of external crises, forming a non-daily conflict backdrop. These two worlds intertwine and operate on the same timeline, driving narrative development. The emotional connection between the two worlds is the foundation for realizing the "individual-world" narrative logic. In Makoto Shinkai's *Your Name*, the emotional bond between the male and female protagonists directly determines the outcome of the meteor crisis. *Weathering with You* and *Suzume* further expand on this narrative structure, attempting to provide feasible solutions to resolve conflicts[3]. Nevertheless, regardless of how the genre evolves, emotional narrative remains the core mechanism driving plot progression and generating audience empathy.

The binary narrative structure composed of the "realistic domain" (world crises) and the "imaginary domain" (emotional connections) results in the absence of the "symbolic domain"—which represents concrete depictions of social reality, as well as society, history, and the nation—thus shaping the distinctive "desocialization" trait of Sekai-kei works[4]. This narrative strategy not only reflects the interpersonal alienation and communication dilemmas in contemporary Japanese society but also achieves an artistic metonymy of social reality by linking emotional conflicts to global-level issues such as natural disasters and cosmic crises. In early Sekai-kei works like *Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet* and *Iriya no Sora, UFO no Natsu*, disaster backdrops such as wars exist merely as vague settings, lacking substantiality and explanatory purposes. This narrative feature is closely tied to the socioeconomic context of Japan's "Lost Decade" in the 1990s. Following the burst of the economic bubble, prolonged recession and the collapse of social confidence led the younger generation to develop profound skepticism toward the traditional social value system. They chose to withdraw from grand narratives and instead turn inward to seek emotional authenticity and certainty. The absence of the "symbolic domain" in Sekai-kei works precisely echoes the psychological zeitgeist of this era: it eliminates the real society that had lost its appeal, anchoring the narrative entirely in the direct connection between the individual's inner self and the survival of the world. For this reason, the protagonist's positive or negative attitude toward the "world" becomes a key factor defining

the emotional tone and developmental stages of the work, and constitutes a crucial aspect of the creative philosophy of the 2000s as pointed out by critic Tsunehiro Uno[5].

It is worth emphasizing that although Sekai-kei is rooted in Japan's specific social reality, its portrayals of themes such as "modern social maladies" and "environmental degradation" have gradually demonstrated cross-border appeal. This narrative strategy—weakening specific social contexts while strengthening universally shared emotional structures and existential experiences—has formed a unique reception mechanism in cross-cultural communication. On one hand, it has enabled audiences from different cultural backgrounds to engage in a spectacular reading of Japanese aesthetics, granting Sekai-kei an independent space for dissemination and circulation in cross-cultural contexts[6]. On the other hand, it has provided these audiences with an emotional projection perspective for interpretation, imagination, and reconstruction, thereby allowing them to participate in the re-examination and reshaping of the symbolic systems of foreign cultures.

3. ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN SEKAI-KEI ANIME

3.1 *Narrative Structure: The Grammar, Ellipsis, and Universality of "Individual-World"*

3.1.1 *The "Individual-World" Centered Narrative Structure*

Individuals are limited in cognition and capability, yet their choices exert an impact on the world. This narrative framework fosters a distinct, paradoxical relationship of powerlessness and agency, and constitutes the most prominent feature of Sekai-kei works: the "individual-world" centered narrative, which serves as the core and most recognizable narrative paradigm of Sekai-kei anime. The "world" sets an unprecedented, unfamiliar and solemn tone for the protagonist group; the subjective experiences and decisions of one or a small number of individuals are directly juxtaposed against the fate of the "world", endowing the limited cognition and choices of individuals with the function of interpreting, determining and even altering the world. Unlike traditional grand narratives that regard collectives, institutions or

history as the nexus of causality, Sekai-kei compresses the significance of the world into an extension of personal experience—the amplitude of personal emotions and the choices made form the energetic core of the narrative, thereby generating intense dramatic tension and ethical dilemmas.

In terms of the aesthetic logic and cultural motivations underlying this structure, Sekai-kei typically emerges in historical contexts where macro-level interpretive frameworks are in decline, with the most direct example being the social conditions of Japan after the burst of the economic bubble. When collective narratives fail to provide stable values, creative tendencies devolve the right to interpret the world's significance to private experience, attempting to reconstruct meaning by amplifying individual emotions. This narrative design is both a strategy to resist uncertainty and an artistic choice: it replaces the abstractness of the world with human-perceptible emotions, enabling audiences to establish direct emotional resonance with the narrative. Therefore, in these works, the "world" is usually not a detailed geopolitical or institutional system, but a set of forces or visions that carry crisis implications for the protagonist—symbolic objects such as towers, academies, weather patterns, and time-space become representatives of the "world", rather than a complete world history.

Second, from the perspective of narrative techniques, the "individual-world" structure relies on strict viewpoint restriction and perspective arrangement. By transferring the right to interpret the world to individual perception and consciousness, this structure maximizes the implementation of first-person narrative, which can be understood in conjunction with the internal focalization narrative perspective theory proposed by the post-classical narratologist Gérard Genette[7]. The focus on internal perspective means that narrative information is configured according to the protagonist's perception, memory and thoughts; many contextual details are omitted, symbolized or presented only as materials reflecting the protagonist's psychology. With the overlap of the character and the narrator, the narrative takes on a highly subjective color. In terms of cinematic expression, this strategy corresponds to the extensive use of subjective shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups, the introspective treatment of sound, and the functional presentation of external situations. For instance, in *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*, the tower, as a symbol of the "world", is not explained

systematically; its significance is mainly embodied through Sayuri's dreams, the male protagonist's longing for the tower, and the tension in interpersonal relationships. The tower is not a political entity, but an externalization of the protagonist's experience. Rather than fulfilling a more grand and authoritative role, it is more of an obsession—"the desire to see the scenery on the other side of the tower". Similarly, terms such as "Instrumentality" and "A.T. Field" in *EVA* serve more as psychological symbols in the narrative than purely sci-fi settings. They act as a medium for the protagonist's inner state, where changes in the world are juxtaposed and isomorphic with the individual's psychological conditions.

Third, the tension and thematic arrangement generated by this narrative structure are often directly dramatized by the text into moral or aesthetic propositions. A common binary opposition is the choice between "saving the individual" and "saving the world": when personal emotions conflict with the survival of the world, the text materializes ethical issues through this dilemma. A typical example is the choice Okabe Rintaro faces in *Steins;Gate*—to save his childhood friend or the assistant who holds the key to the world's future. This setting not only highlights the value of individual emotions, but also exposes the risk of framing the world as "something that can be weighed and sacrificed by the individual". In this way, the world is personified or anthropomorphized, becoming a negotiable subject. In terms of narrative effect, this structure amplifies the symbolic significance of actions: a romantic relationship, a promise, or even a text message may be endowed with decisive consequences, thus constructing a tense chain of tension between the micro-scale (micro-emotions) and the macro-scale (world fate).

Fourth, it is worth noting that the "individual-world" structure exhibits differentiated operational logics in different stages or works. Early texts often depict the world as an ambiguous and powerful external force, with characters mostly acting as passive recipients. The internal timeline of the plot advances gradually with the arrival of crises, and the portrayal of the protagonist's psychology is compressed. In contrast, later works gradually grant individuals more agency in the narrative, transforming them from passive "camera-like perspectives" into decisive and influential actors, with the theme of growth emphasized accordingly. This shift is not simply about endowing individuals with power, but rather represents different narrative responses to the proposition that "the individual

bears the meaning of the world". Some works choose to rewrite the world through sacrifice, such as the "Instrumentality" of all humanity at the end of the EVA theatrical edition, and the tragic scene in *Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet* where Chise, the girl who retains her humanity, and her lover survive alone in the post-apocalyptic world. Others achieve partial restoration or replace the original chaotic order through the protagonist's awakening or cooperation. For example, in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, Utena sacrifices her own existence to bring about Anthy's final enlightenment, enabling her to break free from the control of the academy—the "old world"—walk out of the school gate, and embrace an unknown and brand-new future, delivering a more positive and open ending.

3.1.2 Syntactic Manifestations of "Desocialization"

In the discourses defining the Sekai-kei genre, desocialization is a core and recurring theme. Society does not disappear entirely from the narrative; instead, it is systematically "evacuated" at the functional level—its inherent organizational structures, chains of responsibility, and causal explanatory power are weakened, symbolized, or shifted to the individual dimension, thus manifesting as a state of "floating" social positioning in plot development. Kiyoshi Kasai points out that the disappearance of the social sphere constitutes a crucial defining feature of Sekai-kei[8]. This characterization is not only a reflection of the sociocultural context but also a narrative choice in creation: it devolves social issues from systematic narration to private emotions, thereby entrusting individual emotions and choices with the function of constructing and rewriting the meaning of the world. As a secondary feature of Sekai-kei works that varies according to the nature of specific texts, this trait can be regarded as a fundamental proposition of Sekai-kei anime.

From the perspective of narrative mechanisms, this "floating" state is reflected in three interrelated dimensions: First, the withdrawal of causal functions—institutional subjects (governments, military forces, corporations, etc.) usually only appear as background labels in the plot. Their institutional interventions are either downplayed or reduced to a single line or a piece of narration. For instance, in *Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet*, *The Place Promised in Our Early*

Days and Voices of a Distant Star, narratives about war often remain at the descriptive level of "the war broke out / it had to be done", rather than elaborating on policies, motivations, or organizational mobilization. Second, symbolic substitution—social functions are personified or materialized into individual characters, rituals, or symbolic facilities. These symbols serve the narrative necessity of driving the plot forward but lack institutional logic. Third, spatial substitution—localized fields such as schools, families, and small peer circles are elevated to the status of "quasi-societies" or "microcosmic societies", assuming the socialization functions originally undertaken by larger systems. Meanwhile, the sense of society's existence is confined to the micro-scale fields of character interactions, as exemplified by the conflict-driven plots unfolding on campus in *Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet* and *Shakugan no Shana*. The combined effect of these three dimensions ensures that "society" is both present in the narrative and yet recedes into a floating, distorted backdrop that can be redefined by emotions.

The impact of this floating social positioning on the narrative of Sekai-kei anime and its audience is profound. First, it amplifies the explanatory power and ethical weight of private emotions: when institutions fail to provide explanations or remedies, individual emotional choices are endowed with "substitutive" public significance, becoming actions within the narrative that can directly influence world order. Hence, the plot logic of "saving the world for someone" frequently appears in Sekai-kei works—the act of saving a person is not only a response to private emotions but also carries symbolic consequences that can reshape the world situation. Second, the floating nature of society alters the cognitive guidance for audiences: instead of being required to understand complex social systems and macro policies, audiences complete their understanding and judgment along the emotional arc of the protagonist. This lowers the threshold for audiences to engage with the story, enabling them to make value judgments and emotional responses quickly under the guidance of sensibility, thus facilitating more direct emotional identification. Third, the floating social positioning provides space for the textual aesthetics of Sekai-kei: the realistic elaboration of institutional conflicts is compressed, allowing creators to allocate more cinematographic and narrative resources to the exploration of characters' inner worlds, symbolic objects, and time-space

dislocations, thereby forming the distinctive aesthetic characteristics of Sekai-kei — internalization, symbolization, and high emotional density.

At the cultural and psychological levels, the floating nature of society also has its underlying causes. Since the 1990s, Japan's economic and social organizations have shown signs of long-term disintegration, and public trust in institutional narratives has declined, making creative tendencies more inclined to focus on personal experiences and private emotions. The high attention paid to characters within otaku culture and the rise of database-style consumption have also promoted the popularity of centering narratives on characters and small worlds, reducing "society" to a consumable element rather than a rigorous sociological object. In addition, the floating nature of society is related to the structural changes in the "sense of participation": in Sekai-kei works, individuals both desire social recognition and refuse to be defined by society. For example, in *Shakugan no Shana*, the male protagonist resists the fate of eventually disappearing from the world and gives a name to the female protagonist, expressing the sincere wish that "I want to know the real you, not the you constrained by identity". In the context of institutional dysfunction, characters reaffirm each other through private actions. This is a correction to the notion that "identity is bestowed by institutions or systems" and holds greater existential value. Therefore, the "floating sense of participation" not only describes the weakening of society in the narrative but also reflects the tendency of both characters and audiences to prioritize emotions when participating in the construction of public significance.

3.2 Narrative Subjects: Agents, Character Construction and Audience Projection

3.2.1 Character Database Design in the Context of Otaku Culture

A prominent and prevalent tendency in character design within Sekai-kei anime is centering the narrative on adolescents who stand on the margins of socialization or in a transitional phase—especially the relatively inexperienced student demographic. Such characters typically exhibit a fairly fixed set of traits in terms of appearance, identity, and psychology: the veneer of campus and student life (daily settings including school uniforms, classrooms, and after-school

routes); high sensitivity in emotional expression (a propensity for rich, easily triggered feelings); lack of social experience; and a sense of stagnation defined by "delayed growth". From a narrative functional perspective, this design not only caters to the preferences of the target audience, but is also underpinned by logically interrelated rationales.

First, the student/adolescent setting offers narrative convenience in terms of setting, boasting strong cultural and commercial malleability. Campus and adolescent daily life form a highly recognizable and universal set of scenarios, providing a natural backdrop for depicting mundane life. Within the framework of database consumption in otaku culture, elements such as school uniforms, age settings, and character personality tags become detachable moe attributes. These elements are easily recognized, captured, and repeatedly consumed by audiences, allowing the narrative to quickly establish intimate, everyday details without expending narrative space on explaining social structures, thereby generating micro-experiences that facilitate audience emotional projection. This design places characters at the "midpoint" of life growth. Characters in this identity bracket are neither fully constrained by adult responsibilities nor endowed with mature political discourse power, making them ideal carriers of emotional desire. The various manifestations of immaturity in adolescent characters elicit more direct and raw responses from audiences, who can satisfy their own emotional needs through sentiments of care or redemption toward these roles. This facilitates the amplification of personal emotions into narrative momentum when confronting "extraordinary" crises, enabling audiences to understand the characters' choices and sufferings without requiring sophisticated knowledge of social contexts; meanwhile, it sustains continuous reproduction within the commercialization cycle. Therefore, the adolescent archetype not only serves the narrative intimacy of Sekai-kei anime, but also aligns with the industrial chain-driven ecosystem of Japanese animation.



Figure 1 Character traits in Sekai-kei anime.

Third, from the perspective of psychological and cultural dynamics, the social fractures in Japan since the 1990s have made the youth archetype representative across generations. They are both victims of social anxiety and deeply preoccupied with their inner worlds, which renders youth-centered narratives more adept at translating "social issues" into "individual experiences". For instance, Shinji's loneliness and depression in *EVA* are not merely individual psychological conditions, but also symbolize a generation's universal yearning for connection and recognition. The trivial wishes made by the young girls in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* have consequences amplified to a cosmic scale. Classic Sekai-kei works such as *Boogiepop Phantom*, *Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet*, and *Shakugan no Shana* all adopt an adolescent/youth perspective, exploring themes of responsibility, sacrifice, and identity reconstruction through the extreme magnification of private emotions. This is precisely a way to transform pervasive insecurity into private ethical choices. In other words, adolescent characters function as a collective symbol that mediates through emotions and reflects real-world anxieties via trivial personal matters, facilitating resonance among cross-cultural audiences based on their shared growth experiences.

Finally, regarding the structural representation of the "growth" theme, Sekai-kei mostly adopted a strategy of "delayed growth" in its early and middle phases: characters are depicted as remaining in a prolonged transitional stage of growth, with their maturation often triggered by extreme events. Narratively, two common paths emerge. First, the protagonist evolves from passivity to initiative, achieving subjective awakening. Second, the protagonist attains transcendent growth through sacrifice or transformation. For example, Madoka's final choice in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is not only an extreme manifestation of personal growth, but also a moral commitment to the salvation of the world. These growth trajectories are usually structured through internal monologues, stream-of-consciousness passages, and contrasts with everyday events—the juxtaposition of mundane "small wishes" and extraordinary "great choices" endows the growth process with both realism and profound symbolic meaning. Through such character arcs, Sekai-kei anime not only fulfills audiences' expectations for character growth, but also enables private emotions to assume the function of interpreting the meaning of the world, thereby completing the "individual-world" narrative loop.

To summarize the above arguments, the prevalent portrayal of adolescents/students in Sekai-kei anime stems from the combination of cultural psychology and industrial mechanisms. It satisfies the audience's need for emotional projection, conforms to the consumption logic of otaku culture, and provides the possibility of emotional compensation and growth narratives against the backdrop of social unease. Meanwhile, such character portrayal and the theme of growth structurally reinforce each other, enabling "private emotions" to assume the crucial function of interpreting "the fate of the world".

3.2.2 Depiction of the Spiritual World Projected and Exaggerated from Reality

The inherent unpredictability embedded in the story weakens the hierarchical structure of the primary narration, subordinating it to the psychological activities of the secondary narration. A distinctive narrative technique of Sekai-kei lies in "externalizing" characters' subjective feelings, desires, and fears into one or more independently operating spiritual worlds—these worlds are not mere internal monologues, but are artistically, spatially, and concretely visualized, becoming visible and manipulable narrative arenas within the work. This section will explore, at the textual level, the methods through which Sekai-kei animation treats individual imagination, dreams, beliefs, and the like as narrative entities. These exaggerated spiritual arenas possess their own symbolic rules, event causality, and even "physical laws", intersecting and interacting with the real world, thereby enabling the trivial emotions within "small relationships" to generate observable reverberations at the world level.

The augmented depiction of the spiritual world undoubtedly serves as a narrative pathway to expand the expression of "small relationships" (small worlds). Gérard Genette proposed three narrative modes in his work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*: diegesis, metadiegesis, and extradiegesis. In terms of narrative structure, diegesis directly presents the events within the story; metadiegesis involves the internal experiences of the narrative subject (such as imagination or dreams); and extradiegesis refers to embedding a complete story within another story[9]. In Sekai-kei, the narrative tendency toward the spiritual world can be explained using Genette's classification of narrative modes: the primary narration (real events) is often surpassed by the secondary narration

(internal imagination, dreams), resulting in a configuration of "secondary narration > primary narration." In other words, works typically prioritize characters' psychological imagination at the narrative level: the subject's fears, nostalgia, or desires are not internal footnotes, but rather the driving force behind narrative generation and the catalyst for events. This design elevates individual emotions from private experiences to decisive narrative elements, allowing small interactions, misunderstandings, or wishes between characters to be amplified into opportunities that alter the face of the world.

For the audience, the visualization of the spiritual world serves not only as an amplifier of emotional projection but also as a mediating device for understanding complex psychological dynamics. The existence of the spiritual world allows the internal contradictions of characters to be dramatically presented on an external stage—thus, the audience can directly witness how the characters' fears and desires are woven into concrete conflicts, rather than being concealed in obscure psychological descriptions. This magnification renders the chain of "private emotions → global consequences" visually valid: when emotions are constructed as entities with causal effects, the individual's choices, hesitations, or sacrifices immediately gain narrative weight, thereby fulfilling the genre's core theme of "the individual bearing the meaning of the world". Instead of merely empathizing with the characters vicariously in their minds, the audience observes through visualized conflicts how emotions lead to consequences, thus obtaining a causal and dramatic chain of evidence for comprehension. As Shiori Kitade argues, eliminating the narrative subject and placing the audience in a "translucent" first-person position fosters a closer assimilation between their emotional experience and the textual operation[10]—and presenting psychology in a "worldified" form further elevates this assimilation to the level of "participatory understanding": the audience both witnesses and "participates" in the emotional processes that bring about world-altering changes.

The magnification of the spiritual world also entails risks of narrative openness and ambiguity: when secondary narration becomes dominant and the causal chain of reality is weakened, works tend to feature indeterminate or open endings. This is one of the aesthetic characteristics of Sekai-kei, and also a focal point of audience criticism—that is, the

demand for logical coherence may conflict with the tension of emotional expression. For this reason, creators often flexibly manipulate temporal and spatial narration to balance the tension between secondary and primary narration: temporal dislocations, dream insertions, or juxtaposed everyday scenes can act as "buffer zones", which not only allow the spiritual world to exert a profound impact on reality but also provide the audience with a pathway back to realistic reference points, thereby striking a balance between open imagination and emotional integrity. The depiction of the spiritual world in Sekai-kei elevates the trivial emotions of individuals to forces capable of shaping the world, serving as both the emotional engine of genre-specific narration and an important vocabulary for directors to explore the propositions of cultural anxiety and individual salvation. Subsequently, when these spiritual domains are integrated with flexible temporal and spatial structures, works can, through the interleaving of time and overlapping of space, not only present the high dramatization of the inner world but also preserve a pathway for the audience to return to shared real-life experiences, thus achieving intense emotional resonance and imaginative openness.

3.2.3 *Imbalance and Complementarity in Gender Contrast Settings*

Within the worldview of Sekai-kei works, the emphasis on the "world" dimension reached by personal emotions constitutes a romantic imagination divorced from reality. In this framework, characters in early representative works generally exhibited a narrative dynamic pattern of "weak male protagonist paired with strong female characters": the male protagonist lacks independent decision-making and a clear action trajectory, often serving as a transparent narrative vehicle for the "self"; female characters, by contrast, take on the dual functions of "saving the world" and providing emotional solace, with the two genders assuming distinct narrative responsibilities. As times progressed, this gender configuration gradually evolved toward complementarity. Both male and female characters were endowed with greater agency and in-depth psychological portrayals, and their interpersonal dynamics reflected healthier, more respectful interactions. Furthermore, along with societal development, there emerged notable examples that subvert binary gender norms, such as narratives dominated by female leads or intragender "self-other" relational dynamics.

In Sekai-kei works from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, male protagonists were frequently symbolized as passive or vulnerable figures, while female characters were cast as "combat maidens"—powerful warriors or emotional pillars. The protagonist was typically positioned as a powerless male unable to alter the status quo, functioning as an observer of the overarching plot. This stark contrast between male characters defined by their existence and female characters defined by their actions/functions constituted the first major gender binary in early Sekai-kei anime. Male characters were reduced to objects of existential comparison, with their combat abilities and spiritual fortitude deliberately underdeveloped. In contrast to these male figures, whose individual consciousness was sidelined, female characters served as the mediating link connecting the male protagonist to the world. They dedicated themselves to the romantic and tragic narrative through their combat personas, and scenes depicting their physical forms were ubiquitous. For instance, in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the two young female characters Asuka Langley Soryu and Rei Ayanami are portrayed without restraint, showcasing the devastation and brutality they endure in battle. In *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, though both protagonists are female, Utena Tenjou's childhood fascination with a "prince on a white horse" leads her to adopt masculine attire, speech patterns, and self-referential pronouns. Later in the series, when the school chairman—who embodies the archetype of the "prince"—acknowledges her as a "woman", the camera lingers on her unexpectedly feminine and charming appearance ("Figure 2"). Her counterpart, Anthy Himemiya, is reduced to a "prize" in the duels as the Rose Bride, and her role is confined to providing the duelists' weapons from a cavity in her chest. The physical exposure and vulnerability imposed on female characters through their instrumentalization often became objects of visual consumption for "aesthetic pleasure" among audiences. Their psychological desires and motivations receive far less narrative attention than those of male characters; they are depicted as dependent on men, confined to traditional feminine roles in the gender hierarchy. Ultimately, their portrayals serve only to catalyze the male protagonist's awakening of self-awareness and resolve, or to drive plot twists, rather than conveying their own independent subjectivity as fully realized characters.



Figure 2 The bravery of the 'prince' and the charm of the 'princess' ("*Revolutionary Girl Utena*").

Following the turn of the 2000s, the Sekai-kei genre began to incorporate more elements of complementarity and autonomy, with the gender roles of male and female protagonists moving toward balance. The psychological activities and character growth of female roles were portrayed with greater depth, shedding the outdated portrayal of them as mere objects and subordinates. Male roles also became more proactive and dynamic: instead of being confined to a purely observational narrative perspective, they evolved into active agents that exerted a positive influence on the progression of the story. Examples of such works include the *Rebuild of Evangelion* film series and *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, which feature "caring male archetypes" endowed with communication skills, including the capacity for empathy and compassion[11]. In *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, the five female protagonists each possess distinct personalities and aspirations, with complex interactions and vivid individual charms; Madoka Kaname and Homura Akemi, who stand at the heart of the plot's entanglements, embody the classic "self-other" relational dynamic of the genre. *Steins; Gate* adopts the first-person perspective of Rintaro Okabe, who takes the initiative to traverse multiple timelines and endure countless loops in a desperate attempt to save the lives of the female leads. In *Your Name.*, after swapping bodies, Taki Tachibana and Mitsuha Miyamizu become each other's confidants and motivation, with their relationship tightly intertwined with the looming disaster. *Weathering with You* casts Hina Amano as an autonomous agent with the power to alter the weather (the "Sunshine Girl"), while Hodaka Morishima takes the initiative to shoulder responsibility and offer his assistance. *Suzume* features Suzume Iwato as the leader of a road-movie-style adventure journey, with her male companion Sota Munakata repeatedly facing mortal peril and even sacrificing himself to become the Keystone; ultimately, the two join forces to resolve the crisis of the "Worm". In works of this era,

female protagonists are no longer reduced to one-dimensional "plot devices": they possess complete subjective initiative and coherent psychological arcs, overturning the traditional trope of "the powerless self and the powerful other".

From the perspective of gender semiotics, early Sekai-kei works realized their narrative intentions through the recoding of gender symbols: the pairing of the weak male and strong female challenged the conventional stereotypes of masculinity as stoic and femininity as docile, bringing about an apparent reversal in the gendered meanings embodied by the characters. In later works, however, gender symbols evolved toward greater mutual complementarity. Female characters retained their symbolic roles as bearers of salvation and emotional empowerment, while also being endowed with nuanced inner worlds. Male characters, for their part, ceased to be defined solely as bystanders or victims, transforming into active participants in both action and emotion. This evolution aligns with the characteristics of pluralistic micro-narratives in postmodern culture, where gender identity is no longer defined by fixed grand social narratives but instead becomes a symbolic unit open to flexible recombination. The dualistic structure of emotional detachment and profound sentimentality continues to manifest in later developments. Male characters in these works take decisive action in accordance with their inner motivations, enhancing their self-awareness and sense of identity.

On the whole, the transformation in gender characterization within Sekai-kei anime corresponds to a broader cultural context: amid what Tsunehiro Uno refers to as the cultural atmosphere of "decisionism", characters emphasize making immediate decisions and taking action, prioritizing the act itself over its rational justification. Thus, modern Sekai-kei anime often presents complementary gender roles: female characters remain the bearers and wielders of key powers, while male characters are endowed with greater psychological depth and a stronger sense of subjectivity. Gender relations become more balanced and diverse, gender symbols evolve from rigid binaries to polysemous and complementary constructs, and the narrative trajectories of the two genders shift from divergence to parallel coexistence.

4. CONCLUSION

As a mass cultural medium, animation not only keeps at the forefront of technological development,

but also serves as a prism that refracts the spirit of the times and social psychology. Looking at the global trends in animation creation, the narrative focus has undergone a shift from grand historical and social allegories to the exploration of individual emotions and life experiences. Within this context, Japanese Sekai-kei anime has developed into a distinctly characterized animation genre by virtue of its "individual-world" narrative model that closely links character emotions with the story world. At present, the core tension of Sekai-kei can be understood as the juxtaposition and reconciliation of two propositions: on the one hand, are the individual's private emotions and their extreme expressions, which endow the narrative with immediate immersive appeal and intense moral focus; on the other hand, are the regressive demands of society and the community, which require the narrative to assume certain real ethical consequences beyond emotional tension. The differences in the cultural psychology and ideological orientations embodied in Sekai-kei's "individual-world" structure reflect the profound divergences in the era's themes, social sentiments and the public's spiritual needs against different social backgrounds and historical contexts. Future research and creation should establish a closer feedback loop between theoretical deepening and practical experimentation, so as to support the continuous self-renewal and social dialogue of this genre in a broader cultural context.

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