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Article

# Machine Faith: Artistic, Religious and Philosophical Critique of Technology in Japanese Mecha Anime

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## Abstract

Japanese artistic expressions are embedded in particular discourses on technology and religious practices. One of those discourses is the “robot-loving discourse”, that claims that the Japanese have a special and spiritual relationship with robots and technology. Recent research has shown that this discourse was developed throughout the years, since the Meiji era and are not something “inherent” to Japanese culture, besides having potentially negative consequences. The *mecha* anime genre, in which young men pilot giant robots to fight evil, is a media space where this discourse can be critically analyzed. One of *mecha* most important dilemmas is that technology can turn its users into either “gods” or “devils”. This article analyzes two *mecha* anime and their relationships with technology and religion: Nagai Gō's *Mazinger Z* and Ishikawa Ken's *Getter Robo*. Both made use of the robot-loving discourse and the use of religious play (*shūkyō asobi*) in order not just to tell a story, but also reflect on the possible deleterious effects of technology on mankind: the same technology that saves the world could also doom it. We read *mecha* anime under the perspective of Paul Tillich's demonic, where both the creative and destructive strengths of mankind can be contrasted and warns that humanity must not be under the control of its own creations.

**Keywords:** religion and anime; technology and religion; Paul Tillich

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¿Quién abre el fuego? (Who opens the fire?)

¿Quién siembra el ardor? (Who sows the burning?)

(Rodrigo Zúñiga, “Mazinger”)

## Introduction: The Giants Arrive

Anime and manga have become very popular around the world in the last few years. Initially produced in Japan for local audiences, anime<sup>1</sup> have become some of the most important export products of Japan in the 2020s (Hernández-Pérez 2019; Pellitteri 2022), an outcome scarcely imagined by the first Japanese *mangaka* 漫画家 of the 1930s (Otsuka 2013). Since then, the medium has evolved to tackle a variety of themes, genres and subject matters. Many anime shows are also known for mixing genres, such as incorporating supernatural or fantasy elements into otherwise high concept sci-fi narratives. One such work is *DanDaDan* (ダンダダン 2021), one of the most highly-watched anime of 2024, where a couple of teenagers fight *yōkai* 妖怪 and aliens in modern Tokyo suburbia

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<sup>1</sup> This article adopts a basic definition of anime and manga as “animated productions and comic books” produced in Japan. For the sake of brevity, we will also refer to “anime” as a shorthand for *both* anime and manga. Although we understand that differences in medium can cause different readings of the text (see, for example, the differences between *Devilman's* manga and anime in Pagnoni 2021), we adopt the view that, unless otherwise stated, these differences are not relevant to our argument, since it is focused more on storytelling narratives and discourses, following Ogihara-Schuck (2014, 5). For more nuanced discussions, see Denison (2015).

while keeping up with their school work (Nwaenie 2025). *DanDaDan* is just one of many anime that explore the impact of Japanese religious practices and folklore in a supposedly modernized and secular society.

Another anime genre that explores the relationship between the traditional and the modern is the *mecha* メカ genre. Although the word “*mecha*” is related to giant robot anime in the Western countries, in the original Japanese context *mecha* refers to a subgenre of science fiction anime that focuses on the use of robots and mechanical suits powered by humans (Napier 2001, 11, 86; Denison 2015, 58; Saito 2019, 153). These include anime with humanoid robots such as *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu* 鉄腕アトム 1952, which codified a lot of the genre’s tropes), giant robots such as *Tetsujin 28-go* (鉄人 28号 1956), mobile suits such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* (*Kidō Senshi Gandamu* 機動戦士ガンダム 1979), and even cyborg-related stories such as *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku Kidōtai* 攻殻機動隊 1989). *Mecha* narratives are usually portrayed in futuristic settings, but *mecha* anime in medieval or fantasy settings also exist, such as *The Vision of Escaflowne* (*Tenkū no Esukafurōne* 天空のエスカフローネ 1996). It is also a genre highly embedded in Japanese technological discourses, with most analyses referencing either Astro, RX-78-2 Gundam or EVA Unit-01. In spite of this narrative focus on technology, *mecha* anime curiously also utilize religious concepts constantly, either through allusions or overt thematic explorations on reality (Suga 2024).

*Mecha* anime have become a means to explore Japanese discourses on technology. Ever since the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese state has pushed technophilic policies and official religious practices that are “two arms” of what would become a “robot-loving discourse” after the Second World War. In the 1980s, Fredrik Schodt popularized the term “robot kingdom” to refer to a Japanese “robot-loving culture”. Although Schodt (1988, 197) warned against the impression that “the Japanese people had some sort of cosmic connection with industrial robots,” sometimes these stereotypes are embraced by Japanese institutions themselves. A popular 2006 book, titled *Robotto ga nihon wo sukuu* (Robots Will Save Japan), proclaimed: “we, the Japanese, have a special feeling towards the robot” (Kovacic 2018, 573). A robot-loving discourse emerges in public and private narratives, as part a sense of “Japaneseness” (Kovacic 2018, 573). Takanishi Atsuo, one of the most important (and still-living) roboticists in Japan, claimed that none of the taboos against robots that exist in the West exist in Japan, because the Shinto’s ideas of the unity of humanity and nature allows them to consider humans and robots as one, cooperating towards a better future (Takanishi 2010). While the economic crisis of the late 1980s might have wiped out more fabulous expectations, the love for robots remained a means to distinguish the Japanese economy and cultural products in an increasingly competitive world.

Although these ideas do not reflect the current academic understanding of religious practices and technology in Japan, they are still popular in Japanese society. The current understanding sees a relationship between practices and discourses: which religious practices are accepted within Japanese society and how they predicate its relationship with technology and religion (Sone 2017; Gygi 2018). *Mecha* anime, therefore, is part of this discourse. There exists an underlying idea of “techno-salvationism”, the idea that technology will eventually correct all flaws of mankind. This ideology is promoted through many channels, throughout the world, from Silicon Valley technology enthusiasts to artists and anime writers (Gould and Walters 2020, 278; Szerszynski 2005; Deagon 2021).<sup>2</sup> But that is not always the case with anime. Some anime scholars have noticed how *mecha* anime can be a medium to explore critically themes about technology in humanity’s future, including critiques on the overreliance on technology (Napier 2001, chapter 5; Ito 2010), but they often do not include its religious aspect. In several anime, the wonders of technology and the presence of robots with “hearts” (*kokoro* 心) are contrasted sharply with their equally destructive power and the possibility of robots

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<sup>2</sup> An example of “techno-salvationist” anime (or where its themes are more prominent) would be *The Orbital Children* (*Chikyūgai Shōnen Shōjo* 地球外少年少女 2022): a high-concept sci-fi anime, it portrays the cooperation between children and child-like robots as the key for a better future and the possibilities of a better use of technology being able to avoid its most terrible consequences.

becoming devil-like, demonic creations, contesting the idea that robots only brought good to the Japanese.

As case studies for our analysis, we focus on two *mecha* anime franchises: *Mazinger Z* (マジンガーZ 1972), by Nagai Gō 永井豪, and *Getter Robo* (ゲッターロボ 1974), by Ishikawa Ken 石川賢. These works were both created in the 1970s and have been part of the social imaginary for 50 years, with many sequels and reboots. They both display the aforementioned contrast between making the marvels of robotics as the main selling point of their series, yet also containing sharp critiques on the misuse of technology and its role in transforming mankind. The central dilemma of *Mazinger Z*, and, by extension, a lot of its successors, is in the words of the man who built Mazinger: “When you pilot Mazinger Z, you can become a god (*kami* 神) or a devil (*akuma* 悪魔).”<sup>3</sup> (Serikawa 1972). This dilemma is not meant to be only considered by its characters, but also as a warning to the audience. *Mecha*, including giant robots, are “dream machines” (Sone 2017, 49), meant to represent the potential of human creativity and ingenuity. Thus, reading the installments of *Mazinger* and *Getter* where the pilots (and, by extension, mankind) chose to become “devils”, they do not fit neatly in Reider’s (2010, xx) definition of the “demonic” in Japanese culture, as creatures that represent the grotesque or the “marginalized other”.

We believe a more appropriate way to analyze the “demonic” in *mecha* might be the one explored by Paul Tillich. The demonic is defined by Tillich as the “sacred antidivine” (Tillich [1925] 1969, 85) that combines both the creative and destructive strengths of the human spirit. It is a contradiction of mankind, that can explain how great feats, such as growth of technology, can coexist with its negative consequences, and its implications to mankind’s ethical and moral existence. We believe Tillich’s ideas are useful in analyzing the similarly demonic in *mecha* anime for two reasons. Firstly, Tillich has a non-dogmatic definition of art. For him, the greatest question is if the cultural artifact that can be classified as art “encounters the reality of the world with protest and prophetic wrath against the destruction and demonic powers of the world” (Tillich 1987, 177). This definition can be expanded beyond its original context and application. Secondly, Tillich thought of religion as an “experience on the ultimate meaning of life”, and therefore it is embedded in “all other dimensions of human concern, including the arts in general.” (Tillich 1987, 172) Although Tillich’s views somewhat essentialize a view of religion from his Protestant Christian background, there is merit to his claim that religion and the arts are *dimensions* of the human experience, in which one depends on the other, instead of being separated through walls. The robot-loving discourse, as we will argue, has these dimensions (political, religious, artistic) present in its core, being manifested in *mecha* anime.

By considering religion, technology and art as equal dimensions of the human experience, we have structured the following essay into four sections. Firstly, is the formation of the robot-loving discourse and its role in Japanese robotics and media depictions, including its relationship with ideas of Japanese spirituality (Section 2). Secondly, we introduce both *Mazinger* and *Getter*, situating them in this discourse in the 1970s, and exposing why they are relevant to our argument (Section 3). Then, we also explore the ways in which *mecha* anime display a techno-religious dimension via their allusions to religious motifs and themes, with some of them qualifying for certain definitions of *kami* (Section 4). Finally, we will expand on Tillich’s idea of the demonic and then analyze how the concept can be applied to both *Mazinger* and *Getter* (Section 5). *Mecha* anime, we conclude, can help us to think about the consequences of technology in human society and imagination.

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<sup>3</sup> The word *akuma* 悪魔 is usually referred to Western devils, while the word *oni* 鬼 is used for Japanese demons. Nagai’s work, however, has constantly blurred this distinction. Reider (2010, 145) noted that Nagai’s *Devilman* has used the term “*akuma ningen* 悪魔人間” instead of “*oni bito* 鬼人” to refer to its devils. They are aesthetically Western, but functionally related to Japanese *oni*. In both *Devilman* and *Shuten Dōji* (手天童 1976), his version of the legend of the *oni* Shuten Dōji, *akuma* and *oni* are used interchangeably in the same lines, to name beings that “do not possess love” or are from the “evil realm” (Reider 2010, 149, 152). Thus, the use of *akuma* in *Mazinger Z* also follows the same interchangeability present in Nagai’s work, part of his religious play.

## Robot Kingdom Crisis: Interplay Between Japanese Robotics, Religiosity and Anime

With Japan's widely-lauded technological rise in the post-war period, and the help of both popular culture and government documents emphasizing the love of robots, readers might be surprised to learn that Japan once "feared" robots. Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920), depicting a robot revolt against their human creators, gained popularity in Japan after the play was translated in 1923 and staged the next year. The play resonated with the state of fear produced by the great earthquake of September 1<sup>st</sup> 1923, and the ensuing confusion and persecution of Koreans and social radicals, leading the government to declare martial law (Robertson 2021, 96-101). Unno Jūza 海野十三 wrote several novels with robots, portraying them as foreign entities, symbols of "Japanese inferiority in science and technology... tool[s] that belonged to Japan's enemies" (Ito 2010, 71-72). Robots were associated with the dehumanization of the production line and conformist thinking (Nakao 2014, 117-118). The first depiction of a giant robot comes from the war cartoon *Kagaku senshi nyū yōku ni shutsugen su* 科学戦士ニューヨークに出現す (*The Warrior of Science Appears in New York*), by Yokoyama Ryūichi 横山隆一. Published in a 1943 issue of *Shin Nihon mangaka kyōkai* 新日本漫画家協会 (*Society of New Japanese Manga Artists*), it depicted a giant steam-powered robot vaguely resembling a knight, destroying New York (Nacci, 2014, 16; Ambrosetti, 2024). The piece was meant to be propaganda depicting a terrifying robot laying waste to Japan's enemies: the Western knight, conquered by Japanese spirit and now being used against them.

This change in discourse occurred after a long process deliberately influenced by many actors, including the Meiji government and its successors, corporations, popular culture, religious authorities and also foreigners. The discourse did not emerge from a supposed primordial tradition in Japan, but rather two "arms". The "political arm", which refers to the pre-war technophilic policies, aimed to foster industrialization and high literacy rates, which became a push for roboticization of the industries starting from the post-war era and becoming more prominent from the 1980s on. The second "arm" is the "religious arm", which has origins in the religious reforms introduced to enshrine Shinto as the official religious practice, but not as a religion. They both aimed to promote a sense of "Japaneseness", that there is something essential about Japan and its relation to technology and culture, with an implicit (sometimes explicit) techno-nationalist discourse. The prevalence of this discourse throughout much of recent Japanese social history has had a significant influence on both Japanese robotics and anime. Even today, public intellectuals and government officials acquiesce to this discourse, claiming that there is something "unique" in the relationship between the Japanese people with robots and religion (see Šabanović 2014; Kovacic 2018; Robertson 2018). In the context of these "two arms", anime emerged to both promote and criticize technology.

### *The political arm: technology and anime in Japanese discourse*

Ever since the Meiji era, Japanese politicians and scholars saw investments in technology and education as a means to compete with Western countries (Sugihara 2007). The phrase *wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才, ("Japanese spirit, Western technology") was introduced – no matter how foreign and "un-Japanese" a technology or an institution was, it could be assimilated through the "Japanese spirit" (Allgaier 2015, 8). A 1937 report from Japanese engineers urged the government that "Japanese power was to be based on the Japanese way of thinking, coupled with Japanese technology" (Pauer 1999, 43).

Technology, as reminded by Arnold (2005, 92) is not just a collection of marvels, but has its own politics: it allowed the Western imperial nations to divide the world between "advanced" and "backward" races, a division that deliberately put themselves as the pinnacle to be achieved. The architects of Japanese modernization adopted this worldview to order to catch up to the Western powers, styling themselves as an equally modernized nation-state. They promoted a national innovation system to develop autochthonous technology (Odagiri and Goto 1993). Japan's

modernization was also infamously supported by colonialist-imperialist goals until 1945 (Sugihara 2007, 133-135; Souyri 2005).

Mass media, politicians and scientists all attributed the defeat in the Second World to Japan's seemingly inferior technology. Thus, a "happy marriage between science and democracy" became one of the new Japanese state's objectives (Ito 2010, 86). This policy was called "building the State through technology" (*gijutsu rikkoku* 技術立国), now through peaceful means and enforced by the US-backed constitution (Allison 2006, 55-56; Pauer 1999, 43). This was reflected in an apparent obsession with the "atom", before the devastating effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became widely known. Several manga superheroes had names related to "Atom", before the most famous of them all appeared: created by the famous *mangaka* Tezuka Osamu 手塚治虫, *Atomu Taishi* アトム大使 (Ambassador Atom), later known as *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Mighty Atom), is a superpowered robot in the form of a young boy, known overseas as *Astro Boy* (Ito 2010, 74-75; Nishimura 2023).

The influence of Astro cannot be understated (Napier 2006, 87; Allison 2006, 51-62; Ito 2010; Condry 2013, chapter 4; Sone 2017, 49-54; Robertson 2018, 1-2, 80-81; Nishimura 2023). Following the hopeful discourse of the US occupation era, the atomic technology that once devastate Japan was now – through its ambassador Atom/Astro – seen as something that could lead the nation into a better future (Ambrosetti 2023, 348). Astro became a mythical hero that expanded the Japanese imagination, mostly for boys who would become engineers and *mangaka*, and helped his audience to identify with technological progress (Allison 2006, 56; Geraci 2010, 142). Robertson (2018, 2) noted that, in her field interviews with Japanese roboticists, they had a nostalgic respect for anime robots, and almost all of them had a picture or figurine of Astro in their labs. Hirose Masato, one of the engineers behind the bipedal Honda's ASIMO, remarked that his director likened ASIMO to building Astro himself (Nakao 2014, 113). We see in this incidence a curious interplay between cultural artifacts and economic objectives. In fact, media theorist Baba Nobuhiko wonders if Japanese engineers' obsession with Astro is holding back the advancement of Japanese robotics (Sone 2017, 44).

#### *The religious arm: robots and spirituality*

Astro was considered the ambassador of technology due to his human-like emotions and believing in a hopeful future. Tezuka's editor, when he first published *Ambassador Atom*, pushed him to make Astro/Atom a protagonist with a "warm heart" (*ataitakai kokoro* 暖かい心), making him as near human as possible; Astro has arguably since shaped the affinity towards human-like robots in Japanese society (Nishimura 2023). The search for human-like robots guides the Japanese "synthetic approach" to roboethics: building robots to understand humans (Ishihara 2014, 47). Ultimately, the idea is to create a robot with *kokoro* – the Japanese word literally translated as "heart," in the sense of a human's emotional center: their emotions, sense of spirituality, and the capacity to act upon them, alongside their fellow human members of society (Robertson 2022). The use of a term often charged with spiritual connotations like as "*kokoro*" begs the question of whether the robot-loving discourse has religious origins. That appears to be the opinion of some Japanese public intellectuals, be they artists, scientists or lay people. In an interview, Tezuka himself invoked Japaneseness to explain why the Japanese have different attitudes toward robots:

Unlike Christian Occidentals, the Japanese don't make a distinction between man, the superior creature, and the world about him. Everything is fused together, and we accept robots easily along with the wide world around us, the insects, the rocks – it's all one. We have none of the doubting attitude towards robots, as pseudohumans, that you find in the West. So here you find no resistance, simply quiet acceptance. (Stokes 1982)

The attempts to create a robot with *kokoro* have shaped some notable projects. The robot Pepper is one such example of a robot designed to perform religious rituals; Pepper's designer insisted that it had *kokoro*, thus making its rituals as valid as ones conducted by a human priest (Robertson 2022, 65). Mori Masahiro, one of the most important roboticists of Japanese history, corroborated this unique relationship between the Japanese and robots by claiming that a robot can even become a *bodhisattva*, capable of leading others to enlightenment (Mori 1981). Takanishi (2010, 46-47) argued

the source of the Japanese affinity for science and human-like robots comes from the non-materialistic Japanese religion and philosophy. He claimed that Shinto “sprung spontaneously” in history; that the “omnipresent gods” of Japan are much closer to their people than the “single god” of US-Americans and Europeans. Although one of the most important currently alive roboticists in Japan, Takanishi reproduced discourses that are not updated with the current understanding of Japan’s religious landscape, which is a testament to their enduring legacy.

For any student of Japanese religious practices, the observations above – that official Japanese discourses tend to embrace a sense of Japanese essentialism – have been an enduring issue. Up till the 1980s, the so-called “spiritual intellectuals” dominated discussions in Japanese religious studies, reinforcing notions of “Japaneseness” (Kuroda 1984, 1-2; Ogihara-Shuck, 2014, 4, 6). In this context, the word “animism” is often used to mean a supposed unique relationship between Japanese culture, technology and nature. It was only from the 1980s that scholars have started to review the circumstances in which the Meiji state defined religion: “religion” itself was a word that did not exist in the language prior to 1853, the year that Commodore Perry sent the ultimatum to open the Japanese borders (Josephson 2012, 71-73). In the following years, the Meiji Japanese state constructed definitions of religion in order to separate Shinto as a representation of the “true” and “original” Japanese identity, aligned with a system to worship the emperor, supported by official practices and training of priests, while Christianity and Buddhism were classified as “religions” (Kuroda, 1981; Thal, 2002; Shimazono, 2009; Josephson, 2012). It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into these issues, but one thing is clear: these ideas still influence Japanese worldviews, including on robotics.

As a result, for a long time, the framework of techno-animism was used to interpret these relationships between robots and religion, both in their commercial uses and media depiction (see Allison 2006). The word “animism” itself has been controversial in Religious Studies, due to its associations with a perceived teleology of human evolution (Enstedt and Moberg 2023). Techno-animism was also strongly linked to the pre-1980s “spiritual intellectuals” mentioned above. Sone (2017, 4) attributed this understanding to Western scholars and Japanese public figures enacting – whether consciously or otherwise – the spiritual discourse of “spirit incarnate in nature and inanimate objects.”

Instead, we believe a “performatic approach” should be preferred in analyzing the robot-loving discourse, because their role in Japanese society “is predicated upon highly coded contexts” (Sone 2017, 13). It could determine why certain forms of “animism” are normalized or not, whether in their power relations or media depictions (Enstedt and Moberg, 2023, 137). Through this lens, Gygi (2018, 97) criticized the robot priest mentioned by Geraci (2006) as nothing but a novelty to be sold. Gould and Walters (2020, 285-286) also criticized Geraci’s overoptimism: the robot priest is a just product, not an actual priest; this contradiction instead demonstrates “the remoteness of this future”. For Gygi (2018, 98), it is more appropriate to think in terms of “technology of animation...the technology of relating to things who may or may not be persons.” The animated property is part of a social performance and reflects the audience expectations, but no one considers them to be “alive.”

In this case, the Japanese robot-loving discourse can be analyzed as a performative discourse constructed through the interactions of many actors, as opposed to something “essential” to Japanese history and culture. For anthropologist Katsuno Hirofumi, there are vested interests in promoting the techno-animist discourse in Japan: “By claiming the cultural authenticity of this invented tradition of humanoid robots, [state and industry actors] are attempting to establish or renew Japan’s national image as the source of future robotics technology” (in Gygi 2018, 104). Šabanović (2014, 359) showed that its continuous articulation aims to normalize the introduction of new technologies, in a way that portrays technology as working *because* of the context of Japaneseness. Wright (2024) noted that the government guidelines for AI have a “strikingly utopian” tone, based on tropes codified by *Astro Boy*. This phenomenon may in fact have its negative sides: as Robertson (2018) has shown, the robot-loving discourse might equally promote a discourse that fosters ethnonationalism, sexism and ableism. The care robots, promoted as the golden child of this discourse, have not yet revolutionized the care industry, often costing more than human employees (Wright 2023). Therefore, we avoid

understanding robots as “alive”, especially in an “animistic” sense, but as part of a performance that anime has long been influential in since *Astro Boy* (Sone 2017, chapter 2).

## The super robots: Mazinger Z and Getter Robo

Although Astro is the original Japanese ambassador of technological growth, giant robots came to be associated with the stereotype of “Japanese anime robots,” particularly the two case studies of this article, *Mazinger* and *Getter Robo*. Since they were introduced in the 1970s, they are under the influence of both discourses: the robot-loving discourse and the supposed uniqueness of Japanese spirituality. They are examples of what Napier (2001, 86) observed, resistance to attempts of portraying technology as something purely good and, as we will argue in Section 5, their depictions of robots evolving into demonic entities stand at odds with the practices of Japanese spirituality. They contest Tezuka’s claim of “quiet acceptance” of the robots.

The giant robot genre is divided in two subgenres: “super robot” and “real robot.” The real robot genre came later, popularized by the franchise *Mobile Suit Gundam*, with narratives using the robot as a tool of war, alongside plots focused on political intrigue, for older audiences (Condry 2013, 126). The super robot genre, meanwhile, came first, incorporating more fantastic elements, and less concern with “realism” (Suga 2024, 260). Anime historian Jacopo Nacci defines the super robot as

The classic Japanese giant robot, with its typical traits, is an established character of the collective imaginary: it is a metallic giant with amazing destructive power; it is piloted by the story’s hero; when the hero activates specific attacks, he shouts their names; the hero and the robot defend Earth from an enemy that wants to conquer it; this enemy sends a large number of different monsters to Earth, which are also gigantic, and are punctually annihilated by the robot; the monsters are sent to Earth one by one, each episode (Nacci 2014, 16).

Thus, from a commercial point of view, the super robot genre has an easily replicable formula that was intended to sell toys<sup>4</sup> (Condry 2013, 110). *Mazinger Z* cemented the archetype described by Nacci, starting a “golden era of super robots” (1972-1980). Its plot starts when the teenager Kabuto Kōji 兜甲児 meets his dying grandfather, Kabuto Jūzō 兜十蔵, who asks him to pilot a giant robot he built – Mazinger Z – against the forces of Dr. Hell (Serikawa 1972). During an archaeological expedition, Jūzō and Dr. Hell stumbled upon the ruins of the mythical Mycenae civilization and its abandoned ancient robots.<sup>5</sup> While Jūzō aims to use them for peaceful means, Dr. Hell wants to use them to conquer the world.

*Mazinger Z* reflected trends enacted by technophilic policies. A lot of recurrent supporting characters are engineers. Mazinger is built with a miraculous metal called “Japanium”, extracted from Mount Fuji itself. Japanium can overcome physical limitations such as the square-cube law, allowing for Mazinger’s massive size. Mazinger is powered by “photonic energy”, more powerful than atomic energy, also being developed by the Japanese (Nacci 2014, 29). The first episode dedicates an entire scene to demonstrate the effects of photonic energy in a laboratory (Serikawa 1972). Mazinger Z stands as the only defense line from Dr. Hell’s robots taking over the world.<sup>6</sup>

*Mazinger Z* also explored the ideas of *kokoro* for non-sentient robots. The enemy robots follow the trends established by *Astro Boy* (see Ito 2010): the “evil” robots are merely controlled by Dr. Hell’s Staff of Bardos, and are not themselves evil. One of them, the gladiator Spartan-K5, resists Dr. Hell’s

<sup>4</sup> Anime profit from merchandising and licensing, since animation is an expensive process (Denison 2015, 79).

<sup>5</sup> *Mazinger Z*’s premise is directly inspired by the Ancient Greek legend of Talos (see Mayor 2018, chapter 1).

<sup>6</sup> The trope “Japan stands alone” is present in many early anime. Usually no mention is made to other countries, except in special occasions. Enemies always choose to attack Japan because of its technology, and no mention is made of foreign aid, giving the feeling that the world is largely indifferent to giant robots razing Japan. “The war is very local” as noted by Pelliteri (2009, 281).

orders and refuses to fight. Thus, when Kōji and Mazinger initially engage it, the heroes notice the gladiator's intentions and ceases hostilities. The episode also has Kōji speaking of Mazinger as its own person: "Mazinger Z was built to be a war machine, but it doesn't like to fight very much. Ain't I speaking the truth, Mazinger Z?" Later, K5 is forced to fight Mazinger, nearly winning against it if it wasn't for Dr. Hell's self-sabotage. In the end, Kōji has no hard feelings towards K5, even wishing that it was able to obtain its rest (Ōnuki 1973). This showcases how Mazinger and the other robots are not merely tools – they also possess a sense of individuality and character. Kōji's words are a compromise between literal and metaphorical meaning – Mazinger is not a living being, but its feelings are not merely metaphorical projection either. They emerge from the interactions between Kōji and Mazinger itself. Kōji might control Mazinger, but he is not its *kokoro*. Mazinger having its own *kokoro* is part of the show's performance and it reflects the performance of robots in Japanese society: they are not "alive", but they have their "character" and role in the wider society, protecting and helping mankind.

*Mazinger Z* kickstarted the genre and an aesthetic called "samurai chic", with its bright colors and samurai/insect-like chassis (Alisson 2006, 105). Their protagonists also fit into the character archetype of the *rōnin* 浪人, wandering samurai doing as they please, unbound by the law, yet abiding by a strict and personal moral code (Di Fratta 2013, 4). This trend would reflect in its sequels *Great Mazinger* (グレートマジンガー1974) and *UFO Robot Grendizer* (UFO ロボ グレンダイザー1975), and several spin-offs. We mention two installments relevant to our argument. The spin-off *God Mazinger* (*Goddō Majingā* ゴッドマジンガー 1984) takes place in the mythical continent of Mu, an enchanted world that the protagonist, a Japanese highschooler named Hino Yamato 火野 ヤマト, is spirited away to fight along Mazinger. It breaks with the traditional *mecha* format by blending both fantastical elements from pre-modern civilization that still believes in magic, and yet they still use giant metallic robots to fight their wars. Only Yamato can pilot Mazinger, which is the god of the Kingdom of Mu. Yamato was summoned after prayers from the entire nation against an invasion from the Empire of Dinosaurs, led by the dictator Dorado and his dino-robots. The other installment is *Shin Mazinger Zero* (真マジンガーZERO 2009), a manga made in Nagai's later career, co-written with Tabata Yoshiaki and illustrated by Yugo Yūki. It is a darker take on the original *Mazinger Z* that portrays its titular robot, Mazinger ZERO, destroying mankind and Kōji needing to go through several time loops to somehow avoid this fate. While *God Mazinger* portrayed Mazinger as savior and, without subtlety, a god, *Shin Mazinger Zero* portrays Mazinger as a destroyer, a full devil. This reflects the central conflict in Jūzō's dilemma to Kōji: piloting Mazinger can turn you into either a god or a devil. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the installments and how Mazinger differs in each of them.

**Table 1.** *Mazinger* installments analyzed in this article.

Installment	Premise	Nature of Mazinger
<i>Mazinger</i> (1972)	Kabuto Kōji pilots Mazinger to defend Japan against Dr. Hell	Mazinger is a non-sentient robot, but has a degree of character, an implied <i>kokoro</i>
<i>God Mazinger</i> (1984)	Yamato Hino pilots Mazinger to protect the Kingdom of Mu	Mazinger is the god of Mu, answers to prayers and has a degree of self-awareness
<i>Shin Mazinger Zero</i> (2009)	Kabuto Kōji must stop Mazinger from destroying mankind	Mazinger is an uncontrollable force in spite of being built by humans, a devil

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

On the other hand, *Getter Robo* is the brainchild of Ishikawa Ken, Nagai's assistant and close friend. Nagai pitched the idea, after requests from toy companies to create more profitable characters (Schodt 1988, 84). Thus, *Getter Robo* followed a trio of protagonists (Nagare Ryoma 流竜馬, Jin Hayato 神隼人 and Tomoe Musashi 巴武蔵), each piloting a different Getter machine (Eagle, Jaguar and Bear), that could fuse into one giant robot: Getter Robo. It was the first commercially successful

“combining *mecha*” series. The Getter machines are powered by a fantastic energy source known in-universe as “getter rays”. The machines were initially developed for space exploration by the Saotome Institute, but they became tools to defend Japan against the Dinosaur Empire. Led by Emperor Gore, they are remnants of a dinosaur civilization that took refuge in the Earth’s mantle to avoid extinction, after the getter rays arrived in Earth 65 million years ago. In the present time, they returned to reclaim the surface of the planet and destroy humanity to do so.

The anime followed the standard super robot plot formula. Nacci (2014, 41) noted that, unlike the antagonists in *Mazinger Z*, the Dinosaur Empire is meant to represent the bestial instincts which humanity hides “under tons of rationality.” It is in the manga, however, that these themes are more prominent. With more emphasis on edgy elements, such as violence and gore, the manga portrays the Dinosaur Empire invading with extreme prejudice, using not only giant dinosaur-robot hybrids, but also assassination squads, forced experiments, terraforming Japanese territory while destroying every piece of human civilization, and regressing the surviving humans into primitive hominids (Ishikawa [1974] 2002). They evoke the practices of the Japanese Empire on occupied territories, emphasized by the fact that the dinosaurs are openly portrayed as an *empire*, aiming to conquer and exterminate mankind.<sup>7</sup> Later installments would introduce new enemies besides the Dinosaur Empire, such as the *oni* Burai from the Oni Empire (*Getter Robo G*, *ゲッターロボ G* 1975) and the Andromeda Confederation (*Shin Getter Robo* 真ゲッターロボ 1996, and *Getter Robo Arc* *ゲッターロボ アーク* 2002), a confederation of aliens from the future who intend to stop mankind from developing getter rays technology, willing to devastate Earth for that.

The getter rays are the main feature of the series. Each installment we learn a bit more about the mysterious getter energy that powers the machines and guarantees the heroes’ victory. When they are first introduced in *Getter Robo*, they are a radiation with miraculous properties – they produce no waste and are nearly unlimited. But, at the time of *Getter Robo Go* (*ゲッターロボ 号* 1991), they are replaced by plasma technology for safety reasons, after an accident destroyed the Saotome Institute (this episode is explored in more detail in the prequel *Shin Getter Robo*, published five years later). Only after the return of the Dinosaur Empire, which forces the protagonists to reactive the Getter Robo at the ruined Saotome Institute, humans return using getter rays. It is here that we learn that Getter Rays are sentient, and they chose mankind to become “the ultimate lifeform” – the change to plasma technology was meant to cover up this reveal. In the words of Messiah Tayel, prophet of the getter rays: “we did not choose to pilot the Getter of our own will, it chose us!” (Ishikawa [1993] 2002, 45). And, in *Getter Robo Arc*, it is revealed why the Andromedans were willing to commit so many atrocities in order to stop mankind from developing getter technology: in a dark future, mankind has expanded to space, eliminating all non-human life and worships a giant robot they call Getter Emperor. In the words of one of its acolytes: “We have been chosen by the god called Getter to become the greatest lifeform in the universe! The pinnacle of evolution is... universal domination!” (Ishikawa 2003, 281).

The dilemma in *Getter* is similar to the dilemma in *Mazinger*: using the getter technology, you can either become a god or a devil. The difference, however, is the getter rays themselves seem to be pushing mankind, as a whole, to become more demonic. The same power that allows mankind to create wonderful things such as the Getter machines, to never give up in face of impossible odds, is also the same power that turns them into fanatical and genocidal locust-like creatures. Table 2 summarizes each main entry of the *Getter* series and how the nature of the getter rays changed with each installment.

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<sup>7</sup> For Pellitteri (2009, 280), Japan’s violent imperialist past is usually “exorcized” through constant invasions of Japan by enemy giant robots. In *Getter* the enemy is the memory of Imperial Japan itself, a time marked by brutality and intolerance towards others, judged backwards for not having a technology as advanced as theirs (cf. Arnold 2005). Thus, the conflict is between the imperialist Japan of the past and the peaceful democratic Japan of present.

**Table 2.** All main installments of *Getter Robo*.

Installment	Premise	Nature of the Getter Rays
<i>Getter Robo</i> (1974)	The protagonists fight against the Dinosaur Empire	The getter rays are a “perfect” energy source (no pollution and apparently unlimited) that powers the robots
<i>Getter Robo G</i> (1975)	The protagonists fight against the Oni Empire	Same as in the previous installment
<i>Getter Robo Go</i> (1991)	The protagonists fight, at first, against Dr. Rando, a mad scientist who uses brainwashed humans and giant robots. It is later revealed his war machine was supported by the dinosaurs	For the first part, the getter rays are replaced by plasma energy. In the second part, after the protagonists reactivate the robots powered by getter rays. The getter rays themselves are revealed to be sentient and the source of life. They have “chosen mankind”
<i>Shin Getter Robo</i> (1996)	Happens between <i>G</i> and <i>Go</i> . The protagonists fight the Andromedan aliens and discover the nature of the getter rays	The getter rays are revealed to be influencing the evolution of mankind and protecting it against alien invasions. The revelation is enough for them to stop developing getter technology, turning temporarily to plasma
<i>Getter Robo Arc</i> (2002)	The Andromedans intensify their attacks so much that mankind and dinosaurs are forced to join forces to stop the aliens. In the last three chapters, they travel to the future, where they learn how monstrous mankind itself has become	After mankind was forced to return to getter rays in <i>Go</i> , the aliens intensify their attacks. The getter rays are revealed to be a demonic force of all-consuming creativity and have corrupted the future mankind

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Many other anime would follow, becoming massive successes with both Japanese and international audiences – such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shinseiki Evangelion* 新世紀エヴァンゲリオン 1995) – but *Mazinger* and *Getter* stand out among them for their pioneer status and for reflecting trends in Japanese society for almost 50 years as of this writing, with numerous sequels, spin-offs and reboots. And because they follow these changing trends, they change their plots and themes to commentate on them – both technological and religious.

### The giant robot as a god

Religion has also been a looming presence in anime, including *mecha* anime (Suga 2024). In most cases, religious references are used to establish a “spiritual mood/atmosphere”, and doctrinal fidelity is not necessarily important (Barkman 2010, 27). Other times, however, they can be recreational, a “process whereby viewers re-create themselves and their worldviews through mediated experiences” (Thomas 2012, 15). As MacWilliams (2012, 596) emphasized, anime can be a source of “imaginative consumption” for their audience, using ideas and symbols found in anime “to construct their sense of the self, the world, and the sacred.”

Whether the doctrine is relaxed or ignored to tell a story, or portrayed seriously to convey a sense of orthodoxy, there is always some degree of what Thomas (2012, 16) coined “*shūkyō asobi* 宗教

遊び” (“religious play”). Most applications of religion in anime bear some resemblance to what Bakhtin wrote on the carnivalesque laughter: a laughter that is communitarian, aiming to subvert the orthodox order, yet allowing everyone to participate in a sort of sacred irreverence. This is contrasted with the modern laughter, which laughs *at* someone or something, and is intended to be cynical or a mere diversion (Bakhtin 1984, 12). Modern laughter appears to not have the same degree of influence in Japan compared to the West.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the more direct equivalent to traditional laughter would be the *matsuri* 祭り, where “[p]ain and ecstasy, sex and death, worship and fear, purity and pollution are all vital elements in the Japanese festival” (Sone 2017, 15).

Many viewers of anime, even unconsciously, tend to look for a *matsuri*-like or numinous experience. This is a feeling that often stems from a state of submersion into a nothingness, fascination and dependence on the divine; even more realistic robot series such as *Gundam* can be a source of numinous experience, for its “mythical *gravitas*” (Barkman 2009, 325). “This anime changed my life” is usually a statement uttered jokingly in social media, but sometimes these statements are earnest. It is here that Astro’s *kokoro* influences Japanese engineers into building human-like robots, while searching for a “dream machine” (Sone 2017, 49-51). Mori Masahiro, who also had some interest in anime, claimed that the dream of robots is already obsolete in anime and it is up to real engineers follow through on this reality (Ambrosetti 2024).

The giant robot is likewise a dream machine. Zúñiga (2009) claimed that what made anime such as *Mazinger Z* so unique to international audiences in the 1970s and 1980s was that, unlike US-American cartoons, they had greater emphasis on character development – surpassing all limitations was something more important in anime than in other countries’ shows. Personal empowerment is fundamental to their premises because the heroes are usually children or teenagers: the robot’s cockpit allow them to become bigger and stronger, fulfilling fantasies of power and intelligence (Napier 2001, 86; Nakao 2014, 119). “*Me llamo Mazinger*” occurs many times in Chilean writer Rodrigo Zúñiga’s (2019) poem; *Mazinger*, in Zúñiga’s words, is not something “concrete”, but a lyrical narrator that represents Chile itself during the Pinochet dictatorship, and who helps the child who became an adult “stand on their foot” (Iturriaga 2020).

Thus, the robot becomes a symbol of something greater than was intended, even a god, or a *kami* in a more specifically Japanese context. Holland-Minkley (2010, 33), following Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長, argued that if anything that is awe-inspiring qualifies as a *kami*, including giant robots, “even without any action on their part, their size would likely qualify them for the status of *kami*.” Taking control of a giant robot is akin to becoming a superman, as if taking control of a spiritual substance (Suga 2024, 261-2). In *The Big O* (THE ビッグオー 1999), the protagonist, Roger Smith, pilots a Megadeus – literally in Latin “Great/Large God” – and their names are treated with a reverence that is usually reserved for idols. The titular Megadeus Big O must judge if the pilot is worthy or not, reserving itself even the right to punish an unworthy pilot with death (Holland-Minkley 2010, 35). In *Space Runaway Ideon* (*Densetsu Kyojin Ideon* 伝説巨神イデオン 1980), the titular *mecha* Ideon is a god, who can judge whether humanity is worthy of salvation. *Ideon*’s premise is a theodicy, in which characters are always discussing the “will of Ideon,” whether if it is evil or not, and why Ideon allows strife in the world (Nacci 2014, 264-265).

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas (2012, 64-66) and MacWilliams (2012, 615-624) analyzed the anime *Saint Young Men* (聖☆おにいさん 2006), which portrays both Buddha and Jesus sharing an apartment in a Tokyo suburb. The author intended the work to be a light-hearted and arguably sympathetic parody of religion. While we will not argue that such a work would be impossible to be created in the West, it would likely not be seen as anything but a hostile denunciation of religion by a Western audience. Contrasting with the US-American cartoon *South Park* (1997), which portrays religious figures as powerless and useless to create an antireligious satire, *Saint Young Men* uses religious figures to “laugh at the silliness of modern life”, along with its audience (MacWilliams 2012, 623).

*Shūkyō asobi* is present in *Mazinger*, up to its design: its name, derived from the term *majin* 魔人, can mean both “devil” or “genie”, being neither good or evil in itself (Ambrosetti 2023, 15). In *God Mazinger*, the first episode has the queen of Mu praying and fasting for Mazinger’s mercy against an invasion for three days (Hayakawa 1984), which might remind the reader of passages in the Hebrew Bible. While not an omnipotent god, Mazinger’s divinity is not in any moment questioned: Mazinger is capable of performing great feats and miracles, while appearing out of nowhere after prayers from its followers, as if a literal *deus ex machina*. Not even Yamato, who comes from a modern context, questions its divinity. Mazinger even proclaims to Yamato: “you are me and I am you,” meaning that functionally Yamato is something of a god himself too.

Ishikawa also utilized *shūkyō asobi* in the *Getter Saga*, where his personal beliefs on religion are scattered throughout. In one of the most direct references to religion, Yamagishi Baku, one of the pilots in *Getter Robo Arc*, is a Buddhist priest, who uses his robot to pray in the middle of the battle. *Getter Robo Go* started as a real robot military thriller before evolving into a spiritually-minded plot, with the introduction of Messiah Tayel. In what can only be described as a spiritual experience, Life itself speaks to protagonist Ichimonji Gō 一文字號: “All material substances...the Earth, living beings, fire and wind, time and space. They all have conscience, they all have memories! And so does evolution. As well as that which rules all!” (Ishikawa 1993, 33). In Nagai’s words, “Ken always sought a universal theme, an essence that pervades everything that he interpreted more as a form of energy instead of a spiritual entity like God” (Di Fratta 2013, 21). Both Nagai and Ishikawa had interest in religious imagery, and both made use of *shūkyō asobi* in their works. However, their ideas go beyond simply entertainment, as both authors have specific critiques to pursue in their works, and these critiques acquire a religious dimension.

## The giant robot as a demon

When Takanishi (2010, 51) was asked whether “there is any social criticism of humanoid robot research in Japan”, his reply is that “this is not an easily answered question”. His reply implies a sense of confusion towards the very question itself. However, we have shown above that is simply not true – Japanese scholars *have* criticized both unrestrained technological pursuits, and the robot-loving discourse as well. Works critical of technology and robots have been present in Japanese literature since the 1920s. Although Gould and Walters (2020, 278) identified *mecha* anime as a source of the techno-salvationist robot-loving discourse, the reality is more complicated. *Mecha* anime tends to portray technology as a double-edged sword: it is both a marvel that will uplift humankind *and* also a terror-inducing curse that will drain the human soul. The religious play is still there, but it does not only induce hope or love, but it might induce fear as well.

Although a lot of positive stereotypes have origin in Tezuka’s work, he had mixed feelings towards technology itself. His 1949 manga *Metropolis* (メトロポリス) was inspired by posters of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and his fears that “mankind might destroy itself because of its technological overdependence” (Ito 2010, 85). Tezuka had intended to write *Astro Boy* in a much bleaker setting, but his editors instead pushed for a more utopian future (Schodt 1988, 76). As shown by Godart (2013, 37-38), Tezuka distrusted civilization itself, because it cannot transcend mankind’s “animal and mortal nature.” He also resisted materialism and the idea of the Japanese spirit (Hutchinson 2012).

The core of *Mazinger Z*’s conflict is Dr. Jūzō’s dilemma to Kōji: piloting Mazinger, you can either become a god or a devil. Both Mazinger’s destructive powers and Kōji’s inexperience in battle often lead to lots of destruction in the show, and these casualties serve to warn the audience about Mazinger’s power and how careful one must be with it. It was a glimpse of what would happen if Kōji had chosen to become a devil. As mentioned in the introduction, we do not think that Reider’s definition of demonic properly captures the extent of the demonic in *mecha*. Instead, we believe Paul Tillich’s idea of the “demonic” can provide a fruitful analysis of what this choice would mean.

### *What is the demonic in Tillich's works?*

In her seminal work on the history of the *oni*, Noriko Reider (2010, 1) wrote that “the Western adjective ‘demonic,’ while the closest Western term to describe *oni*, falls short of capturing the full idea of these creatures.” Unbeknownst to Reider, the definition of “demonic” has been sharply debated in the Western sphere. As one such example, the writings of Paul Tillich assert that “the demonic” is not simply about what is considered “evil”, but “the sacred antidivine”. Scholars of Japanese religious practices have not yet explored this avenue of discussion, as Tillich wrote in a context of Protestant Christianity and German philosophy. Tillich presented a definition of “demonic” that stands differently from Reider’s definition, of the “marginalized other”. Nevertheless, we believe Tillich’s ideas do resonate and find applicability with Japanese portrayals of the demonic and the monstrous and because the *mecha* genre is a genre that East (Japanese traditional forms and discourses) and West (technology and Christian imagery) are combined. We argue that Tillich may provide useful insights into how we should characterize figures that humans find awe-inspiring and yet monstrous – even if they are man-made like robots.

Tillich’s ideas on the demonic are part of a German tradition of philosophy, theology and literature (see Wetters 2016). The demonic is something that invokes “not only a lack of form<sup>9</sup>, but also a contradiction of form; there exists not only something less positive, but also something contra-positive.” (Tillich 1936, 79), a “sacred antidivine” that is the holy/sacred with a “minus sign” (Tillich [1925] 1969, 85), a “structure of life” (Tillich 1987, 113). The demonic is not absence of virtue, but its corrupted coexistence with vice, in which all that matters is positive results for a limited group. Using the example of the Roman Empire, which was called demonic by early Christians, but kept the civil peace (Tillich 1936, 58), the demonic can combine virtue and vice, such as a family which supports racist beliefs and yet can treat each other kindly, especially since it was those families that supported the Nazi party; it is an unholy combination that fosters selfishness, instead of true communion. Tillich’s language is abstract and there is no “concise and unambiguous” definition of what the demonic really is in his work – which fits the nature of the concept (Dahl 2015, 487). It emphasizes a union between “form-creating and form-destroying strength” (Tillich 1936, 81). Thus, human action has both a creative strength of divine origin and a destructive strength of an antidivine origin. The demonic is like drunkenness; an eruption of subconscious that is also ecstatic, overpowering, creative, and has the power of bursting the limits of personality (Tillich 1936, 90). It can be seen as an eruption of the carnivalesque/*matsuri* that can liberate creative energies, but ends in destruction if left unchecked in its attempt to become god-like.

In practical terms, Tillich illustrated the demonic with some examples: fertility cults, where both the sacred and the ascetic converge with the profane and erotic; Dostoevsky’s Great Inquisitor, in which Christ must be killed over and over to preserve the Church’s power; and, in economics, where nature and labor must be exploited to create the products of modernity through a process of “creative destruction”, which Tillich compared to “the blood sacrifice to the god of earth who devours life in order to create life” (Tillich 1936, 79).<sup>10</sup> Absence of religion does not eliminate the demonic, which could emerge even in secular societies (The basic ideas, Fukai 2013, 66). The existence of the demonic is, ultimately, a “refutation of every utopian self-deception”, both secular and religious ones (The

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<sup>9</sup> “Tillich explicates the relation between form and substance as a triad of elements that constitutes every cultural creation: content (or subject matter), form, and substance (or import) [...] the form makes a cultural creation what it is – a philosophical essay, a painting, a law, a prayer.” (Yip 2010, 26).

<sup>10</sup> In economics, “creative destruction” refers to the idea that the mechanisms of innovation depend on replacing old products and techniques with new ones; Joseph Schumpeter called it the “essential fact about capitalism” and it is a fundamental concept in economic growth. For orthodox economics, hindering this process will have dire consequences for long-term economic growth (Caballero 2008). If Tillich’s analysis has merit, then this process has costs that most economists do not fully consider.

basic ideas, Fukai 2013, 68). Any attempt to elevate oneself as God, without acknowledging limits and errors, opens the door for the demonic (Tillich 1967, 2:51).

For Tillich, while capitalism reached new forms of autonomy, it was at the cost of objectification of everything else. “The victorious gods are themselves full of the demonic” (Tillich 1936, 101). Capitalist triumph primarily results in two consequences: class struggle and imperialism of the economic sphere over all the others, including the ethical and religious one (Tillich 1938, 48). A capitalist society becomes marked by conflict and competition, necessary for its maintenance, acquiring idolatrous status<sup>11</sup>, where all concerns serve this objective (Tillich [1925] 1956, 108; 1967, 1:13). New technologies emerge from this process, not to improve mankind’s lot, but in order to serve the unending growth. Thus, the demonic is not limited to capitalism, but is an “active and obstinate force” (Dahl 2017, 488), an *all-consuming creativity*, that humanity “produces and then falls under the power of what he has produced, the whole system of industrial existence” (The basic ideas, Fukai 2013, 68).

Tillich portrayed the demonic not merely as a critique of technology or capitalism. He identified the demonic as something intimately related to human action – in the process of alleviating suffering, the mere expansion of the possibilities of production is not enough to eliminate the demonic, because the very desire to overcome and thrive needs the demonic itself to go forward. Without a means to sanctify this process, no matter how much it produces useful contributions to mankind, either improving their economic lot or allowing for more freedom, it will consume its people. Tillich, ultimately, laid the foundations for a *critique of creativity*.

What is needed then, according to Tillich, is a *kairos*. *Kairos* means “a moment at hand, in which we can do something which we otherwise would not be able to do at all.” (The basic ideas, Fukai 2013, 63). Tillich would consider the Japanese emperor declaring himself a human being, and the whole collapse of the emperor worship system (Reider 2010, 112) a *kairos*, because it allowed the Japanese to rethink and restore their country. The *kairos* points to the eternal and its values, faith and hope (Tillich, 1936, 122; Dahl 2015, 503).

*Mechademonomania: humans create robots, robots take over humans*

Although Tillich and the demonic tradition might be removed from the Japanese context, it is not necessary to make a direct link between them and *mecha* anime.<sup>12</sup> Tillich did converse with Japanese scholars on his ideas. His trip to Japan, in 1960, allowed him to present his ideas to a non-Western audience, including his ideas on the demonic. Tillich was marked by what a Japanese friend told him, that Japan was “a schizophrenic nation, split by the conflict of the old and new” (Informal report, Fukai 2013, 120). This schizophrenic split has made Japan vulnerable to the demonic, both in Buddhism (meditation as an end in itself) and Shinto (absolutism of gods over everything else) (Fukai 2013, 68, 100-104). His warning came from a place of concern, since he was not afraid of describing Nazi Germany as a demon-possessed nation (The basic ideas, Fukai 2013, 65-66).

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<sup>11</sup> Tillich defined idolatry as “the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance” (Tillich 1967, 1:13). In other words, capitalism and nationalism will be idolatrous if they become the measure from whom all its adherents judge their actions and otherize the ones who do not follow it, replace God with their doctrines (Tillich 1936, 58).

<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that Japanese fiction might have been influenced by the demonic is not an unreasonable hypothesis, due to *R.U.R.*’s early influence. According to Czech literature expert Daniel Just (2024), Čapek might have been influenced by ideas on the demonic due to his closeness with German literature. Just (2024) also mentioned Čapek’s other works, such as *Salamander Wars* (1936), *The White Disease* (1937), and *The Factory for the Absolute* (1922) that also could fit in Wetters’s (2016) idea of demonic. Further research in this line should be encouraged.

His Japanese audience, however, did not seem to be interested in or even understood his ideas on the demonic (Fukai 2013, 109, 132). Therefore, we are proposing a way to continue Tillich's attempt at dialogue. This schizophrenic split is present in the discussion on the social role of Japanese robots and *mecha* anime, where the old and new constantly clash. Reider (2010, 145) already noted that the existence of the *oni* in modern era became entwined with modern technology. In *mecha* anime, many enemies have demonic appearances: many enemy robots in *Mazinger Z* are meant to look demonic, while in *Getter Robo G*, the enemy is the Oni Empire, composed of humans turned *oni* by their leader, Burai. As mentioned before, "Mazinger" has origin in the term that can be translated as "devil" – becoming a "god" means that, without Kōji, Mazinger is just a machine of destruction.

The demonic can be used to "read" *mecha* through Tillich's theology of art. In his lecture "The demonic in art" (1956), he illustrated the demonic through several classical artworks: in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, hell is filled with demons and humans grasped by demonic powers, with Christ himself being demonic, without any mercy or love for the damned; in Goya's *Los caprichos*, a woman is condemned as a witch or heretic, while it is actually her persecutors who are in a demonic possession state; James Ensor's *Demons tormenting me* portrays Ensor himself surrounded by demons, inciting him to give in to temptations (Tillich 1987, 105-112). These dark and negative depictions also involve a "religious aspect", that are very expressive of their reality and context (Tillich 1987, 174, 177).

For Tillich, cultural artefacts have *Form* (the aesthetic or medium decided by the artist), *Inhalt* (the content or subject matter) and *Gehalt* (its "revelatory content", its "style"). Following this classification, religious artworks are not religious primarily because of their content, but because of their style (Manning 2009, 157-158). Therefore, art does not need to have a religious theme or content to be "religious art". Tillich's approach does have several limitations – his lack of knowledge in art history, his insistence in ranking artistic movements, and his almost attributing magical antibourgeois properties to Expressionism, among others – but he has also provided tools to expand the intersection between theology and art (Manning 2009, 160, 165). For this reason, *mecha* anime, despite being produced in a context away from Tillich, can still be read under Tillich's framework. The ambiguity of forms is present in both *Mazinger* and especially *Getter* – the demonries of the fusion of man and technology do not create a "divine" form, guided by grace, but rather an "antidivine", demonic form that express itself in the ecstasies of destruction. Both the *kokoro* of humans and robots become corrupted.

In *Mazinger*, even if Kōji chose to fight for mankind alongside Mazinger, Nagai's other works imply that the story could have gone another direction. The ending of the *Devilman* (デビルマン 1972) manga (which was written while Nagai worked on *Mazinger Z*) has its protagonist letting the demon inside him win total control over his body, after he loses faith in mankind due to its many atrocities, and ultimately leading to the end of the world (Reider 2010, 145-151; Pagnoni 2021). *Shin Mazinger Zero* incorporates *Devilman* tropes in the *Mazinger* universe. Unlike the heroic Mazinger of the anime, Mazinger ZERO, the "Ultimate Demon God," extinguished mankind several times. Kōji's initial attempt to stop Mazinger ZERO from emerging fails when he is absorbed by it: "The ultimate power...that will let me become a god...or even a devil! I am the Alfa and the Omega...the ultimate demon king! I am Mazinger!" (Tabata et al 2009, 118). There is no difference between god and devil; mankind is destroyed by the demon god they built and Kōji is sent back to the past to try again. While Jūzō's dilemma of being either a god or a demon is more well-known, few pay attention to what he says afterwards: "You will be known as a superior entity" (Serikawa 1972). The warning of apotheosis is not a mere attempt to "look cool," but rather gives the audience the weight of expectations fostered by technological achievements – humanity must take responsibility for its creations.

The demonization of the machine is taken to the highest level in *Getter Robo*. In *Shin Getter Robo*, the *oni* Burai is resurrected by the Andromeda Confederation, and calls Getter the "cancer of the universe" (Ishikawa [1996] 2002, 227). Ryoma, who had been the main getter pilot since its first 1974 installment, after seeing visions of a dark future where humanity worships a giant robot called Getter Emperor, starts to cast doubt over everything he did so far. "You can't control Getter Rays...What's

going to happen to humanity if we continue to use Getter Rays?! It may become a threat even greater than nuclear weaponry” (Ishikawa [1996] 2002, 393–395). The series had already depicted weapons that have long surpassed nuclear armaments in terms of destruction capabilities. The comparison with the real bomb is meant to be a reality check for the reader. Getter energy allows them to win the war, but if they keep using it, it will mutate mankind into something else. In *Arc*, the protagonists are sent to that very future where they witness mankind becoming an unstoppable force of destruction, casually eliminating entire alien civilizations for no other reason than the “sin” of not being human. “We have been chosen by the god called Getter to become the greatest lifeform in the universe! The pinnacle of evolution is... universal domination!” (Ishikawa 2003, 281).

Instead of mankind using Getter Rays and creating Getter machines, it was the Getter Rays *themselves* that created mankind, orienting its evolution and now demanding that they become gods. It breaks with the *Astro Boy* paradigm by having robots – the Emperor – choosing not only to ignore human definitions of good and evil, but also ordering them to commit evil. It also subverts the performance of Japanese society, something noted in-universe: “Impossible! A robot isn’t some kind of living being.” (Ishikawa 2002, 289). Just like in *Shin Mazinger Zero*, there is no distinction between god and demon, or awe-inspiring and monstrous. By taking the place of God and placing evolution as the ultimate concern, it reached idolatrous status – a state of concern that eliminates everything that does not “fit”, especially non-human lifeforms.

Humanity itself becomes more demon-like due to the power of the Getter: “Give yourself to instinct and you will understand everything. Why does life exist? Why do humans exist? Why does the universe exist? And why do we kill each other? That’s because there is no other way.” (Ishikawa 2003, 318). “Techno-eroticism”, a euphoric state of power and excitement through war (Napier 2001, 88, 94), becomes part of daily human existence after they are possessed by the Getter. Rereading *Go* after *Shin* and *Arc* raises lots of questions: many characters, when absorbed by the Getter, claim to have “understood everything,” to all that there is to life, becoming more than willing to return to the Getter Rays themselves. They accept their fates with smiles on their faces. It finds echo in Tillich’s observation that, in the New Testament, the possessed had knowledge of Jesus’s true nature before the normal people. The demonic, therefore, can induce a state of enlightenment – but it is a contradictory enlightenment, filled with bestial instincts (Tillich 1936, 58). In *Arc*, we see the consequences of this, where humanity has become possessed by a demonic spirit of continuous evolution. This is taken to the extreme in an episode of the animated adaptation *New Getter Robo* (新ゲッターロボ 2004), “Hell’s Upheaval” (Kawagoe 2004). In a dark future, each of the 6 billion humans are fused into individual getter machines and now battle for supremacy over each other, until the strongest victor emerges.<sup>13</sup>

Although we may never know Ishikawa’s plan for the end of the series, there are indications this demonic future ruled by the Emperor could be defied. In the *Arc* manga, the first instinct the protagonists had after witnessing the future was to be horrified and ensure it will not happen. In the animated adaptation of *Arc*, the series ends with the protagonists about to fight against a “larval” Getter Emperor. It does not matter if the Arc team win or loses, they made their choice (including, by extension, their robot, Getter Arc) and refused to follow the Getter’s will: “The past and the future can eat shit! Our future, the only future that matters is the one we make for ourselves!” (Kawagoe 2021). In contrast with the uniformity of the getter-possessed humanity (that evokes the same demonic spirit in Nazism, following Tillich), the series has shown a true collective whole does not unify and homogenize seamlessly; it retains its ability to partition and branch out into the constituents’ individual directions, utilizing their autonomy and disparity. The protagonists learn to cooperate with each other and even with their former enemies, to recognize their flaws and

<sup>13</sup> In the spin-off *Shin Getter Robo vs. Neo Getter Robo* (真ゲッターロボ対ネオゲッターロボ 2000), the original *Go* protagonists rejected the Getter instead, showing different outcomes are possible. In the manga, Ichimoji Gō tried to reject the Getter’s destiny for mankind, claiming there is too much blood in their hands; the Getter, however, ignored Gō’s pleas (Ishikawa [1993] 2002).

limitations to defy and maybe overcome the destiny chosen by the Getter, bringing a *kairos*. Although the Getter will always lurk<sup>14</sup>, there is always hope there is a better path, less destructive path – that human creations, especially technology, will not control humanity's fate. Defying this destiny, however, might cost a lot.

## Final Thoughts

Concluding their book *How the world became rich*, orthodox economists Mark Koyama and Jared Rubin (2022) elected “yet-to-discovered technologies” as the solution to climate change. In other words, there are secular expectations that technology will become the ultimate savior of humanity, even despite economic troubles. These issues of the “modern world” are also a religious concern, because Koyama and Rubin imply that the economic growth – made possible by technology – will also redeem any “sins” committed to achieve it. These expectations are arguably present in the Japanese robot-loving discourse as well, that “robots will save Japan”. They are not just unquestioningly repeated through the *mecha* genre, they are criticized. Both *Mazinger Z* and *Getter Robo* confront the robot-loving discourse through their religious play to seriously comment on these issues. They do not cease to be a play, but they also introduce some necessary caution and even terror into their readers, warning them of a possible future where the hopeful promises of technology are unfulfilled, and humans are taken over by their creations. Those warnings parallel the warnings made by Tillich on the demonic: “The victorious gods are themselves full of the demonic” (Tillich 1936, 101). They all saw mankind losing control of its own creations, its own creativity and becoming not just a victim, but also an accomplice of this process. Nevertheless, Tillich, Nagai and Ishikawa also saw the means to defy the demonic. With the increasing accumulation of technology and the changes it promotes in our lives, their ideas will still resonate and be relevant.

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<sup>14</sup> “As long as space exists, life, too, will exist, for all energy is born of the same origin” (Ishikawa [1993] 2002, 122). Contrast with Tillich’s claim the demonic power can be banned, but it cannot be eradicated (1967, 2:163).

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