

***Tenshi No Tamago* and the Art of Symbolism**

By Ian Craig

The 1985 anime OVA, *Tenshi No Tamago* (Angel's Egg) by Mamoru Oshii is a masterclass in symbolism and minimalistic storytelling. Many films try to tell a minimal story, such as *Mad God* (2022) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968); and while *Mad God* is a pretentious gore fest, reveling in its own disgust and filth, spending almost ten minutes on a revolting gutting of a human being, showing the horrific scene in all of its disgusting wretchedness. Another scene shows giant humans beings shocked into releasing refuse into the mouth of a human funnel, spending over 3 minutes showing us this disgusting process, for no reason other than revelry. The film had potential but loses itself within its reverent god-worship of filth. On the other hand, *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a brilliant exploration of evolution and the boundaries of space. Using groundbreaking special effects, incredible cinematography, and simple but effective dialogue, *2001* leaves a lasting impact on the viewer that they will soon not forget. Despite for all of the praise for *2001*, it is a horrifically boring movie, dragging on for what feels like an eternity, as scenes of space-craft floating through black screens take minutes to only cut to another scene of ships flying in the darkness of space. *Tenshi No Tamago* has all the faults of a minimalistic movie; slow pacing, pretentiousness, and pointlessly long shots on nothing, yet for all of these faults, *Tenshi No Tamago* handles what it is beautifully, in a short seventy-minute runtime, telling its story, delivering its message, and giving the viewer plenty of awe-inspiring visuals to always remember even after the somewhat shorter film wraps up, leaving a lasting impression that the viewer will never forget.

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Set in a dark bleak world, without any animal life, seemingly devoid of all sentient life except for a young girl and her egg, Yes, that is right; her egg. But before the audience meets The Girl, the film opens with a man standing on a checkerboard, as a large spherical structure descends out of the sky, adorned with thousands of statues of what appears to be people of faith, as chanting plays in the background. However, it soon cuts to The Girl and her Egg, without any explanation for the scene. The young child first is first shown to us the audience to be sleeping, and as she slowly awakens, she leaves a large egg behind on her bed. Throughout the movie, she protects this egg more than even her life, freaking out whenever there is any potential danger, even if that danger is naught but worry. As she travels this dark macabre land, she travels through a forest and she begins to fill up a large spherical flask with water from a pond, something she will go on to do almost the entire movie, with many different flasks.

Eventually she makes it into a dilapidated town and explores the wreckage for more of these glass flasks, as well as food. After exploring and giving us beautiful scenery shots of this ruined town, she comes across a fountain in the center of town, of course going to fill up her glass. However, this time as she is taking the water, The Girl notices several stone statues of what appears to be fishermen and runs off in fear. In doing so, she runs into The Boy, the only other human character we meet in the entire film and the same one from the opening, and though originally apprehensive of him, the two begin to travel together.

As the duo travel through the city, they begin to witness these stone fishermen begin to grab their harpoons and come to life. Giant shadow fish begin to swim through the city and the fishermen throw their harpoons at these giant fish, destroying windows, doors, and the city in general. The two eventually make it to a massive church, where a large glass pane of the fish

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gods is seen, confirming that this was a religion that this civilization worshipped before everyone died.

The pair of unlikely companions eventually travel to an ark shaped structure that the girl seems to know, and it is eventually revealed that there are hundreds of flasks strewn across this tower, all filled with water. As The Girl lays down the flasks she had been filling during the movie, The Boy asks her how long she has been doing this, and she replies with a simple shake of her head. As they travel, they come across a massive mural of a tree, and The Boy begins to recite a passage of the Bible from Genesis; the story of Noah. He explains that the world was flooded to destroy sin, and that Noah and his family got into an ark before rising with the new sea.

The Boy then explains how Noah sent out a dove to see if the ocean had begun to lower, and in the real world, the dove returned with an olive tree branch, before being sent out and never returning. In this story, the dove never returns, and Noah and his family never hear from it again. They then proceed through this Ark, before coming across the remains of a massive bird. causing the two to stare in awe. Eventually, after night falls and they go to rest, The Boy breaks the Egg with his cross, and leaves. In the morning as The Girl rises, she discovers the egg shattered and in pieces all across the floor. In a fit of grief and panic The Girl runs out of the Ark and into a ravine, falling into water and drowning. As this happens, massive eggs on pillars across the land begin to grow translucent and show massive fetal birds within them. The film, however, never explains any of this and instead closes as The Boy looks off into the distance and sees the Spherical entity from the beginning slowly rise from the sea. As he looks, the audience and him see that The Girl a now beautiful and awe-inspiring statue adorning the entity. As the

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camera pans out with the spherical object rising into space, showing that the land they were on, is the peak of a mountain, the only land left in the rest of the world.

“What did I just watch?” Is what almost all audience members think after seeing this movie. Yet, when viewed under the lens of symbolism, things begin to click more and more into place, showing the story the director is telling with his movie. The movie opens with a large spherical object adorned with statues of worshippers, immediately foreshadowing the heavy Judeo-Christian symbolism of this movie. It then cuts to The Girl within an Ark, very clearly an illusion to Noah’s Ark, and her egg. These all lead to the quick conclusion that Judeo-Christian symbolism will be the nexus upon which this entire film revolves, but that is supported by the world in which this movie takes place.

The worldbuilding of this movie is based upon the Bible, it’s main concept being as though the sea never lowered again, and the world remained eternally flooded except for Mount Ararat. When Noah sent the Dove out, it never returned, and in this world, spewed its progeny across this land as seen in the giant eggs at the end of the movie. Eventually Noah seemingly found the lone mountain of Ararat. They set up a city and fell away from God after time and began to worship this great fish god we see the fishermen statues chasing. They became like many religions in the world destroying the things around them while chasing shadows, before going extinct. With using the story of Noah, which is a bible story that everyone knows, the story immediately establishes it’s connection with the Judeo-Christianity and shows that the roots and tendrils of Judeo-Christian symbolism spread through at least the world building of this world, but can be assumed is present in the story as well.

Within Christianity, every single person is given a calling, and though it does not keep you from going to heaven without completing it, you will not receive the fullness of God and

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what he has for you. These callings may never fully make sense to you, or to those around you. However, those who seek the fullness of God should strive to follow the calling they have been given. *Tenshi No Tamago* is a story of faith and following God's command. The Girl's egg symbolizes her faith in god, and the seemingly pointless continual filling of the flasks represents her spiritual calling in this depressing and bleak land. The Boy represents Jesus, with bandages all over his hands and a cross-type weapon, as he comes to this land to test The Girl's faith. By the end when her egg is broken, the Jesus stand-in frees her from her quest and allows her to go to heaven, which is far better than the purgatory-like world she lives in; as shown by the end when she is visible on the God ship. The story and plot of this movie are genius uses of symbolism to tell such a heartwarming and wonderful story of faith and rebirth.

However, the reason this movie shines because of its symbolism, is not because it uses Judeo-Christian symbolism. It could use Hindu symbolism but use it the same way it uses Judeo-Christian symbolism, and it would still be a brilliant movie. The reason is found within how it uses its symbolic devices. If this movie was just like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) and used symbols and allusions to Biblical mythos just for show and to look good, then it would be like anything else. What this movie does brilliantly, however, is tell its story through its symbolic world building and narrative. If you stripped away the Judeo-Christian symbolism, as the online video essayist Max Derrat formulates as a popular theory with support from a popular biography on Mamoru Oshii, the movie can be interpreted as a movie about a girl losing her innocence to a man, as symbolized by the egg and water, a "traditional symbol of femininity in Japanese culture", and the man carrying a "phallic shaped weapon" who uses this phallic weapon to destroy her egg. Yet this is not what the movie is about, and that's because of how *Angel's Egg*

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tells its story. This movie is a beautiful tale of faith and following God, and the reason we know this is because of the symbolism that creates the world and tells the story.

Even still, symbolism is a tricky thing to nail down, or even do successfully, and yet this movie does it perfectly. Using overt and constant Judeo-Christian symbolism, it is successfully able to convey a narrative. Instead of how most movies use subliminal symbolism, *Angel's Egg* plays its hand fast and with no subtlety, but it does it well, if not perfectly. It not only has themes and storytelling from the Bible to build its world, but it also tells story through symbolic allusions. There is almost nothing out there that tries to do this. A close parallel would be *The Lighthouse* (2019), which is a retelling of the Greek story of Prometheus but loses itself in pretentiousness and an underlying homosexual messaging, forgetting to tie in the story of Prometheus till the very end. The main character's barely alive body being eaten by seagulls at the very end of the one hour and fifty-minute movie, is one of the only references to its allegory of Prometheus in the entire movie. *Angel's Egg* on the other hand, is the perfect balance of storytelling through symbolism, not losing itself within its own story, not becoming so pretentious that it is miserable, not so daft and simple that it fails to deliver its heavy themes. This is why *Angel's Egg* is an impeccable movie and perfect use of symbolism, that everyone should experience once if they care for thought-provoking films.

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Works Cited

Derrat, Max. "Angel's Egg – A Puzzling Masterpiece from the Director of *Ghost in the Shell*."

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