



S.G.

ON THE SHOULDERS
OF GIANTS

攻殻機動隊

STAND ALONE COMPLEX

SOLID STATE SOCIETY

A DISPATCH

BY BRIAN

YEAR  SHELL

New Port City, glistening with a sheet of rain, is being watched. An enigmatic, purple-haired commando perches atop a curvy, futuristic gantry crane in the city's dimly lit shipyard. Through the blurry soundscape of weather, machinery, and radio chatter, we hear the commando say, "I've located him." The camera pulls back to reveal that this is one of many cranes, rising out of New Port City's shoreline like so many discarded ribs. The communications of nearby Public Security officers fire, and we cut to Section 9 *in situ*. These developments resolve in a strategically familiar tableau, the faint echo of something a seasoned *Ghost in the Shell* fan might come to expect—with some pretty big caveats.

Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex: Solid State Society wants us to enter in a fugue state about Motoko Kusanagi's current status. Sure, many a *Ghost in the Shell* property opens with Kusanagi perched high above a cyberpunk skyline before she jumps catlike out into the night. But *Solid State Society*'s tone is an immediate shift from the television I.P. that birthed it. The colors are darker, the dialogue is urgent and siloed, and the imagery is clouded with stark lighting and a whispery, choral synth track. An unknown crime is being committed, and Kusanagi is patently alone in her observations. We'll hear Section 9's communications, but she's not part of them. It's immediately clear that something has changed.

That's our first glimpse into what the 2006 television film is going to offer. The film, produced by most of the same Production I.G. staff as the television show including Kenji Kamiyama, had a budget of 360 million yen¹, or around 100,000 more than an entire 13 episode run in 2015². Yoko Kanno makes a triumphant return in the score, though some things sound like (well-) remixed tracks from the run of the show. The data seems to indicate that the film is what was created in lieu of a third season—which was technically produced later in SAC 2045³, but we don't have to face that barrel quite yet.

Solid State Society, like a lot of the other properties explored by the Year in the Shell, is going to fork through a few barebones manga ideas, but Kamiyama mostly appears to have spun up a tale of his own making. Leaving two years after the events of 2nd GIG, during which Prime

¹ From the Production I.G. Website: https://www.productionig.com/contents/works_sp/47_/

² From an ANN article by Eric Stimson: <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/interest/2015-08-13/anime-insiders-share-how-much-producing-a-season-costs/.91536>

³ SAC 2045 airs in 2020, takes place 11 years after the conclusion of SSS, and is helmed by Kamiyama. OSG reserves the right to be scared of it because aesthetically it looks so. So bad.

Minister Kayabuki instituted a Refugee Nationalization Act that—more or less—deescalated the conflicts surrounding the Dejima Island refugee crisis. It appears that Kusanagi resigned from Section 9 not long after these events, citing that Section 9's increasingly tight tether on Kayabuki's whim restricted her ability to apprehend the criminals that truly endangered New Port City.⁴ Now, she operates a little bit more like a Chroma in the Shirow manga—she pilots various bodies and conducts her own investigations from a supercomputer lair deep within the city like some kind of Dark Knight (tm)(c). Because of this, her situation in the script and the various Section 9 member's attitudes (primarily Togusa and Batou... spoiler alert—the girls are fighting) does a lot of mirroring with *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*⁵, in which the Major is a disembodied cybergoddess that kind of just dips in to be extremely cool and cerebral and then leaves again.

SSS' core conceit revolves around the titular Solid State Society... which, unfortunately, is a term that gets kind of lost in the folds of a distinctly *Metal Gear* ideological puzzle. The Solid State Society is, textually, the philosophical thought experiment of a cybernetic gestalt of wealthy, debilitated geriatrics in a nursing home chain. Now, this is confusing, and I think some of the significance here is elided by the Noun Laser that Kamiyama's writing room is aiming at us.⁶ The gestalt *itself* is referred to as the Solid State Society, but it is *also* referred to by the Puppeteer as something deliberately designed as part of a state apparatus to engender a class of disconnected, elitist Japanese nationalists brainwashed in massive autism centers to be... well. That. Do you see why I evoked *Metal Gear* earlier?

What matters about the plot of SSS is this: there are key figures in Japan's administration that utilized a massive cybernetic apparatus to systematically abduct over 20,000 children, placing them in cyberized induction centers in an attempt to fabricate an entire generation of model Japanese citizens. There's also a thing where Kusanagi has formed a subconscious antipersona who it turns out manipulated said apparatus to make several attempts to destroy this operation and... I don't really know; ascend the souls of the children to the vast and infinite net? This is one of those manga ideas that seem to really turn to ash when someone tries to

⁴ I'm doing some inference here, this is one of the things the film doesn't prioritize, which I think is mostly for the benefit of the already very overworked script.

⁵ If you're reading this and haven't listened to much of the show, we covered *Innocence* earlier this year. I would maybe listen to that episode, because frankly... this is not the only time I'm going to bring up the ways in which SSS occupies a similar space.

⁶ This Deadly Laser would typically be suffused through a 26 episode season of *Stand Alone Complex*. But it wasn't. It was 105 minutes. A lethal concentration, if you ask me.

manipulate it into an adaptation. More on that later (and, yes, I do intend to talk about the mechs at some point). For now, let's focus on some of the things the film serves up that I think are particularly valuable in the contemporary moment.

THE RHETORICAL FASCIST GAMER FACTORY

While this is a rather clumsily told story with not a lot of good action despite such an impressive budget, it offers a glimpse into some of the systems that hyper-nationalist and fascist logic tend to latch onto in order to work their way into the populace. It need not be waxed on and on here: the globe is experiencing a very dismaying surge of ultranationalist rhetoric that, in many cases, have tipped right over the edge into fascism as of the last few years.⁷ We've talked about it on the show a lot already—a lot of *Ghost in the Shell*'s ideas are hauntingly palpating as an adaptive apparatus for a manga from the 90s with a *lot* of errant speculation about futuristic optimism. What SSS does specifically is it serves as a showcase for a set of anxieties about aging, ideological inheritance, and national identity. Because of these pieces on the board, SSS is able to play an example game of a quickly unraveling fascistic landslide. This, then, is backed up against the ways in which the *Stand Alone Complex* I.P. has already made observations about the perseverance of the self in the face of radically eroding cybernetic threats of the state's own making.

The errant ultranationalism at the heart of 2nd GIG's issues perseveres here, and it works the way it usually does: it props itself up on the fear of a diluted culture. Here's a transcript of a conversation Chief Aramaki has with one of the central antagonists, Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative Ito Muneo:⁸

MUNEI: For a public servant, you don't seem to have the vaguest clue as to the gravity of the threat that this country is facing. If nothing is done, our country's prosperity will be supplanted by other races one day in the near future. So to prevent that, we're expending

⁷ I'm making this observation this as a folk critic who once studied world literature and lives in the world and reads the news, so if your first thought is about what the 'edge' between hyper-nationalist rhetoric and fascism is, you're gonna have to look at some people who have active or lasting *bona fides*. I might start with Umberto Eco.

⁸ Transcript taken from the English dub. Exchange starts at approximately 1hr 27 mins.

tax dollars on these children who have no families, giving them educations, and entrusting our future to them. Just what exactly do you find wrong with that?⁹

ARAMAKI: Those taxes are from the money you exploited out of the elderly and the refugees that you indenture to this facility.

MUNEI: That couldn't have been avoided, either. Stop and think about it? What have these people ever done for the good of the country, hmm? They don't have families, or children, and they don't contribute as taxpayers. After living only for themselves, they demand, "oh, take care of me!" Their selfishness is appalling! If I could, I'd impose a new tax on them to restore the revenue we lose because they're too old or can't work.

ARAMAKI: You're splitting hairs. Besides, I'd like to know what you politicians have been doing about it all this time. Who takes responsibility for you people putting self-preservation and vanity ahead of your duties and burying pressing issues at the bottom of the pile?

MUNEI: I'm proud that I *have* accepted responsibility for it.

ARAMAKI: Are you proud of violating cyberbrain ethics laws and human rights as well?

MUNEI: They were steps that needed to be taken, in my opinion.

ARAMAKI: You refuse to budge.

Eri Hotta, a Japanese historian and author of the book *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy*¹⁰, talks about a speech that Japanese WWII Prime Minister Hideki Tojo made, which became mandatory at all movie theater showings for a brief period before Japan moved forward with the Pearl Harbor attack. Hotta relates that a considerable showing of Japanese nationalists had, similarly to what was going on in Europe at the time, capitulated to the idea that the economic and cultural woes of Japan at the time could be blamed on foreign influence. Western films, merchandise, and art were quickly banned or subject to intensive scrutiny. This is a period that echoes throughout a good deal of Japanese artistic endeavor. I immediately think of the state of

⁹ By the way, this conversation is taking place in a facility that can be best described as the big autistic orphanage apparatus from the Laughing Man arc but multiplied by a factor of 100. Aramaki, Munei, and some other figures we'll get to in a while are surrounded by a massive, sterile farm of twitching children in big meta VR headsets.

¹⁰ Published in 2013 by Knopf Doubleday. You can get a pdf of it at dokumen.pub. I don't know about the validity. Seems legit to me.

affairs presented in the *Battle Royale*¹¹ novel, where the protagonist's obsession with Bruce Springsteen must be a secret as heavily kept as sexual deviancy. In *Countdown to Infamy*, Hotta says that “[Tojo] faithfully echoed Japan's deep-seated feelings of persecution, wounded national pride, and yearning for greater recognition... it was a sentimental speech, and it was notable for what was left unsaid.”

You'll hear a lot in the cultural noosphere these days that the people who currently hold the levels of power in our country are 'saying the quiet part out loud.' I don't have to cite a bunch of sources to relate that, based on passive observation, we can see how this is one of the ways the door is left open for fascism. I'm not qualified enough, nor do I have the notches on my thought timecard, to argue for or against the idea of nationalism as a barebones concept. But what I think we can mostly agree on is that it looks particularly ugly right now, and that is something that the conversation between Aramaki and Muneo spells out in alphabet soup. Where there is anxiety, where fear of the future can be drummed up, so can hostility and bigotry. The world is stumbling through a largely unresolved pandemic that many Westerners have not stopped calling 'the China virus.' Contemporarily, the Conservative Party of Japan—an employer of Nanjing denial, ultranationalist rhetoric, and heavily radicalized immigration logic—has gained massive traction since 2023. Look at how it is simply called 'The Conservative Party of Japan.' Remember how Tojo's speech was notable for what was left unsaid.

Muneo 'says the quiet part out loud' more than once during his exchange with Aramaki. The organic bodies of the children being indoctrinated in this facility sometimes twitch in the background while they speak. The other members of Muneo's cabinet shift uncomfortably. Finally, Kusanagi and Batou show up, people's brains start to get blown out, and the story sort of devolves into a confusing layer cake of noun and kind of choppy theme work regarding the self—but Muneo's logic, the idea that this logic might have far-flung reciprocation in the Japanese state apparatus, and the majority of the 20,000 missing children are left largely unresolved. SSS wants those things to be left unanswered. Much like the ending to 2nd GIG, Section 9's job is never done. What we don't really analyze here is Sec 9's responsibilities as an arm of that apparatus, but *Ghost in the Shell* isn't the media property that's going to take that bird's eye view, and we've established that many times throughout the Year in the Shell. Muneo's logic exploits the Japanese anxieties

¹¹ Written by Koushun Takami, published in 1999 by Ohto and translated in 2003 by Viz. If you're not familiar with either this book, you'd do yourself a favor by reading it for literally all the same reasons I'm here talking about SSS.

about its education system, about the next generation left behind. The film doesn't mention this, but there isn't a world in which the birthrate crisis in the country doesn't fold into this anxiety. Who holds our flag when we're too old to let it lean on us?

It's important that Aramaki has this confrontation with Muneo while Togusa kind of sits there and looks pretty—Aramaki is an elderly person, a member of the social class Muneo seems to hold so much contempt for with one hand while presuming to cradle the infant generation in his other. Early in the film, government agency schmoozing¹² and Kayabuki's frustrating inability to wield her own power end up putting Aramaki in a position to take Section 9 off the missing children case. Batou does a world class Batou move and creepily waits in Aramaki's car to confront him about it. In the ensuing conversation, Aramaki says, "reality being what it is, I won't be able to stay here forever. So, under the circumstances, shouldn't we create a new organization? A unit that can tackle not just one investigation, but 3 at a time, while only using so many of its resources. Don't you think that's the best way to carry on our ideals after we're gone?"

Aramaki, ultimately, has the exact same concerns as Muneo. The flip side is that he views himself as a public servant and understands his role as a person in a system. Muneo, on the other hand, wants to do a big, grandiose project that will fix the country in one fell (admittedly very slow) swoop. He is doing a Gouda on a scale much larger—a scale so large, he lost oversight on it, leading to his downfall. That's neither here nor there, but I will say Aramaki's logic is kind of just as scary as Muneo's. In response to the anxiety of passing down his sense of duty and his ideology, Aramaki has decided that expansion is the only answer. But again, *Ghost in the Shell* isn't going to be the media that sits down and asks what police do with power, how they move the levers of statecraft by using the social violence contract to push fear and intimidation—but it is going to talk about some of the other ways fascism is employed, which I think we've gotten pretty comprehensive about here. My take on that is that it reveals a potent truth I think gets lost in the forest in contemporary rhetoric. Fascism is a systemic problem, it is a parasitic problem, it is a practice that employs specific behaviors and strategies—and it is also not an intangible deity. It is a process with determinable and scrutable results. It can be dismantled, it is subject to oppositional processes, and it is fungible. If you think it's silly to say that when we are, in fact,

¹² In one of the Year in the Shell episodes—forgive me for not remembering exactly which one—Alice has a fantastic monologue about agency delegation in Japan and how, as showcased in *Patlabor 2*, often the argument about duty and jurisdiction and the prideful drive to be the agency that does all the good jobs and makes Japan the strongest country often leads to situations like this, where Aramaki has had to surrender one leg of the investigation in order to be able to proceed with another.

currently *scruting* some of these processes and their outputs right now, I would say that this is probably the best time to remind each other that vigilance is really the only thing every single one of us has.

I think that's enough of that. It's important to think about these things in relation to media from the recent past. I think we¹³ have done a lot of finger-pointing, built a lot of resentment, and are very preoccupied with facing the now. But we got here by walking a road, and if we don't look back and figure out what the pieces are on the board, we won't be able to move forward in a meaningful way. Sometimes it feels like history's on this dire, indifferent cycle, and that we're slipping backwards into something our grandparents were sure would never happen again. But as said in *Heavenly Tyrant*¹⁴, one must believe that humanity can learn collective lessons, even if the tapestry isn't always visible, and hope isn't always responsible.

SO WHAT THE FUCK IS WITH THE MAJOR?

Kusanagi is doing some pretty good Year in the Shell shit in this movie. Earlier, I referenced *Metal Gear*, and I want to also bring up the Metal Year¹⁵. In our *Metal Gear Solid 4* episode, Niko said she was fascinated by the politics of the thing until 'all the *Metal Gear* shit started happening.' I feel very similarly about this. At the onset of Kusanagi's situation in the film, we see her doing body hot swaps¹⁶ and talking to herself as if she had her own little Section 9 up in her brain. She does fun Major things like stealing Batou's car while doing the most obvious reverse psychology imaginable on him (which, of course, works, because Batou would drink motor oil if Kusanagi told him to). She also, apparently, has done so many cyberdives and inhabited so many simultaneous bodies that she has developed a creepy tulpa called the Puppeteer.

The word here is localized as Puppeteer, but in romaji it's '*kugutsumawashi*,' which our friends at Wikipedia translate directly to 'Puppet Spinner.' The contrast here is important: the antagonist of the 1995 *Ghost in the Shell* film is referred to as '*ningyo-zukai*,' or 'Doll Handler.' The

¹³ 'We' being people with morals who would, could, and should speak out against fascism wherever possible, in whatever nation on our blue planet.

¹⁴ A Three Kingdoms science fantasy mecha novel by Xiran Jay Zhao, released in December 2024. We covered it this summer. This is also a paraphrasing of a sentiment shared by several characters, the verbiage is on me.

¹⁵ The Metal Year, A.K.A. The Distant Year of 2024, was a year-ish long variable coverage project of the mainline *Metal Gear Solid* series.

¹⁶ One of these, seen briefly, is a purple haired twinkie dude, and OSG will always pop for Kusanagi deciding to chill as a bro for a while.

Puppet Master in the '95 film is an entity born from untouched human cognitive waste on the internet and gained selfhood. It pilots bodies like a jellyfish slipping into a mannequin. It 'handles dolls.' Kusanagi's alter ego does a similar thing by inhabiting the dead body of Tateaki Koshiki, who built the Solid State apparatus to find and indoctrinate said untethered children. I like Puppet Spinner, or Puppeteer, to describe this machination, because it's not that the tulpa wants to 'experience true life' by being born as a new thing and dying at the same time,¹⁷ (or, making a new type of doll) it simply wants to manipulate situations to resolve in what it thinks is the best moral outcome. What is that morality? We have no idea. The Puppeteer manipulated Koshiki's apparatus to secretly displace children from abused homes (not orphans), using the Noble Rot Senior Center as... like. A child laundering machine, I guess. Let's talk about *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*.

Innocence is playing with a lot of these pieces. A section of human will—or the detritus of dreams left unresolved—interfacing with statecraft in a way that creates a crisis. The Major is in some existential situation that doesn't appear to have a clear resolution. The dialogue sort of sucks sometimes. It's all here. I think making a movie and calling it a sequel to something in this franchise does something accursed to the script. I'm bringing this up because, while I think *Innocence* can be an incredibly aesthetically clumsy movie, I've come out of my experience with SSS appreciating it a lot more. It plays with its toys in a way that SSS kind of falls short. The fight sequences at the end are unmatched. We'll talk about some of the fight sequences in this movie, or, rather... the one, but it's pretty dire out here for multiple reasons.

What I really like about the compare/contrast maneuver with *Innocence* and SSS is, *Innocence* took a big swing with the ending and the resolution of the character work. Kusanagi does leave, we are left facing a future that doesn't have her in it as a member of Section 9, but as some sort of digital Dark Knight (tm)(c) that may or may not be doing cyber hentai in the digital world like in the manga. In SSS' conclusion, it's left unsaid, but it seems very likely Kusanagi is going to rejoin Section 9. She awakens in the big Section 9 tropical pool room¹⁸ after a perilous brainhack by her own tulpa, muses about returning, and looks out over the vast cityscape. Then, she says, "Batou... the net is truly vast and infinite."

¹⁷ This is your sign to watch the 1995 film if you're feeling like I just made a big logical inference or something. It's pretty textual.

¹⁸ This is the room where Kusanagi and Batou pretend to be on vacation in that one *Stand Alone Complex* episode before Aramaki yells at them to get back to work, so I'm just always going to call it that even when the tropical hologram shit is turned off. I've earned that.

I'm going to be honest, this pisses me off. That line in the '95 film is about Kusanagi drawing the space she's about to inhabit, talking about the new thing that she's become, and looking up and out into a future where her relationship to the material and to the body are completely different. Here, she's just saying it because she said it that one time. That's cheap to me, and it speaks to a thing I find the *Ghost in the Shell* franchise is often successful at avoiding, but sometimes falls deeply into, which is 'ha ha remember that one thing we all loved?' Of course we remember it. That's why I bought this on Youtube for fifteen dollars. I want to see you do something fun with it, not just regurgitate it at me. What is this, *GQuuuuuux*?

THE MECHS

Powerfully terrible decisions are made with the mechanics in this movie, and I'm going to say right now that this is a big 4 for me on the mech rating scale for OSG.¹⁹ First, we have the Fuchikoma. All three OSG hosts agree; the Fuchikoma is an egregiously cool little guy. We all jumped for joy when they came in at the end of 2nd GIG.

At basically no point does a Fuchikoma factor into a strategic effort or a fight. Batou has one encounter with a thinktank being controlled by a dying old man with a microvirus in him. The Fuchikoma basically serves as a body shield for the Major, and nothing else. The enemy think tank is alright: it has freaky pile bunker legs and a yawning cannon mouth. I like what we're doing with the idea that its pilot on a deathbed rampage and actually just dies on his own in the cockpit before getting up to anything too crazy. But it's a crime that Batou didn't get to have a chase in the Fuchikoma, or anything of the sort. We see Proto and the red-gowned robot surgeons doing robot surgery on them later, and they're squeaking around in the background of a few shots, but other than that, our girls are basically abandoned by the wayside so that Togusa can have another subplot of 'this man should be radicalized against his own job by now.' This is a crime to me, but it's not even the biggest crime. I've been holding this in the entire time I've written this, but SSS commits a cardinal sin. Are you sitting down? You should sit down.

The Tachikomas are back.

Again.

¹⁹ <https://osgpod.com/ratings>

Now, Year in the Shell listeners know we love the Tachikomas. I think their story in 2nd GIG is an incredibly powerful argument for the definition of personhood, humanity, and what it means to be the vulnerable thing behind the aperture of the fragile body. They exhibit a certain gravity, and they provide a light touch of humanity to a cast of what is otherwise truly a group of weapons that have faces and social disorders.²⁰

But fuck all of that because we need to play the hits. They're just back. Not even a low-effort handwave is showcased. They just open a truck bed and three Tachikoma trundle out talking about how good it feels to stretch their legs and shit. Do you know about the gravity of a well-told character story that has an ending? Do you know how narrative is often stitched together, woven, and cinched by moments of powerful character interaction? Do you know how blistering it is when you undercut yourself by saying 'actually that didn't matter?' Gross!

The icing on the cake here is that the Tachikomas have a big ground fight on a grassy knoll with some GDSF armed suits. These are kind of a new variety, they have the same weird proportions as some of the 2nd GIG suits, but they have a key difference in that they lack helmets and the penis minigun. Which, like. This fight is egregious. They did us dirty, folks. They did us so dirty. In the final *Stand Alone Complex* episode, I read aloud some commentary from Kamiyama that indicated he thought *Ghost in the Shell* was the 'greatest robot anime ever.' Yeah, I think we can all tell he said that before they choreographed this scene. It's so bad. The GDSF suits trundle along like toddlers with full diapers. The Tachikomas zip around in the same zigzag pattern. Approximately ten thousand rounds are plummet into this hillside and the weird matte-digital painting doesn't change at all. It looks like *RWBY* season 1 out here. I cry real tears.

Is there something to be said about the cyborg bodies as mechs that we have harped on all year here? Kind of. I said my piece about the tulpa. I like what they did with the naming convention, but it gets laundered into the confusion the script itself seems to have about the Solid State. It just doesn't hang together. I mentioned *Innocence* because it's doing a very similar thing with the Major's bodily situation to a much greater effect. I love the way her body in *Innocence* is a completely unremarkable doll that, if not for Batou's compulsion to put a jacket on her, would be indistinguishable from the enemies they're fighting. I love her unclear motivations, I love that she seems conflicted at times. The Puppeteer thing is both a good idea and also a too-close

²⁰ Of course, I'm referring to Section 9 here.

literalization of something that was ultimately more successful in a different movie. I never thought I'd say that about *Innocence*, but I guess it's cyborgs all the way down.

IN CONCLUSION....

I could spend a whole day extolling the virtues of contemplating stories in the wake of what's looking to be a terrible set of years in the grand scheme of our polity here, and I kind of just did? Ultimately, it's up to us to figure out what things speak to us in the world, what things have value, and how that value is conceived through execution of a well-oriented theme and dynamic characters. I don't think this movie hit all the top notes, especially the top notes of what *Ghost in the Shell* is capable of, but I do think it has an interesting curiosity and, like 2nd GIG, deeply relevant if somewhat stymied interrogation of that curiosity. I also, while composing the first draft of this Dispatch, watched the 2017 *Ghost in the Shell* put on by Paramount and I have come to understand the true breadth of what people can and can't do with this franchise. At least, I think. But this is a mecha podcast, a mecha website, and, technically, a Mecha Dispatch? So I suppose I should conclude by saying that this was not good mecha, and that sucked.

We've talked on the show many times about what a somewhat successful deployment of 3D CG in mecha anime, and I would say about 90% of the time it really falls short. There is one shining sequence in SSS where a GDSF armed suit is basically doing an arm wrestle with a Tachikoma, and for just a few frames, both machines reside on the flat plane, drawn like the rest of the show. In that moment, I saw what truly could've been; and perhaps will be again one day.

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