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SUSAN J. NAPIER

## Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from *Godzilla* to *Akira*

From as early as 1951, with the awarding of the Venice Festival Prize to Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon*, the Japanese film has been one of Japan's most highly regarded exports. Since that time, Western art house audiences and critics have been impressed and moved by the variety and artistry of the Japanese cinematic oeuvre. In the 1950s and 1960s, this variety ranged from the subtle explorations of family life expressed in Ozu's films to the dynamic intensity of image and narrative in Kurosawa's work. More recently, Ōshima Nagisa's controversial films such as *Ai no koriida* (1976; *In the Realm of the Senses*) have shocked and intrigued audiences worldwide, while Itami Juzo's brilliantly funny examination of Japanese eating habits, *Tampopo* (1986), made it into 23 top ten lists among American newspapers and magazines in 1987.

Despite the consistently high praise of critics and reviewers, however, the Japanese film has remained largely an elite preserve, appreciated in urban art cinemas and on university campuses. And yet, there is another side to Japanese cinema which remains largely unexamined in both Japan and the West. This is Japan's popular cinema, the often unexported movies seen by millions of ordinary Japanese citizens. For many years this popular cinema was ignored or bemoaned by critics in the West, who saw the rise of mass-produced and mass-marketed films as a link to a perceived decline in the quality of Japanese cinema overall.

Busy lamenting the increasingly small output of the classic directors, Western critics and reviewers have shown little interest in the mass-culture items that were crowding out the art films. Donald Richie, for example, the dean of Western film critics of Japan, has summed up popular Japanese cinema as "a plethora of nudity, teenage heroes, science-fiction monsters,

animated cartoons, and pictures about cute animals.”<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, this assessment is largely correct.

Recently, however, critics in both the West and Japan have begun urging a closer look at Japanese popular cinema and, at least with science fiction films, a closer glance turns out to be highly rewarding. In the case of Japanese science fiction, particularly animated science fiction, the critics are often following the lead of the fans, both Westerners and Japanese, who have turned certain movies and series of movies into major cult hits.<sup>2</sup> This has been true since the release of the first *Godzilla* (originally *Gojira*, 1954) monster movie in America in 1956 (released in the United States as *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*), and has continued to this day in the overwhelming reception accorded to the 1989 science fiction blockbuster, *Akira*, an animated film based on an almost equally popular comic strip series by Otomo Katsuhiro.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, not all Japanese science fiction films have been consistently popular in the West. Enough of them have inspired such intense devotion, however, as to raise intriguing questions about the reasons behind their popularity. In particular, one might ask if there are certain popular culture universalities at work here. Or is it that science fiction is a particularly international genre? At the same time, even those works that have been popular in only Japan can be looked at from the opposite point of view: was there something “too Japanese” about them that might inhibit their reception outside Japan? In any case, both types of films provide opportunities to understand modern Japanese culture from a new vantage point.

Indeed, the enormity of the whole science fiction phenomenon in Japan itself, including novels, fan magazines, and comics for both adults and children, is well worthy of scholarly attention. This article is an attempt to deal with that phenomenon on a selective basis, an effort to use one part of the science fiction genre—the dystopian/disaster movie and related comics (*manga*)—as a key toward exploring both the science fiction genre in Japan and contemporary Japanese culture in general.

1. Donald Richie, *Japanese Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 80.

2. The fans have also inspired the Japanese studios. For example, *Tokyo Journal* reports that in the first six months of 1988, 16 of the 35 films released by the three major studios (Tōhō, Tōei, and Shōchiku) were “animated or live action features based on comics.” James Bailey, “Lifting the Lid on Japanese Movies,” *Tokyo Journal*, Vol. 8 (1988), p. 9.

3. The first book of *Akira*, according to its Japanese publisher, became a “number one best seller” in Japan in the 1980s. See “Akira and Otomo,” introduction to the *Akira* English edition, *Akira: Book 1* (Tokyo: Mash-Room Co., Ltd., 1990). According to Paul Hulbert, an editor at Kodansha, 45,000 copies a month are sold in the United States. The film was the top grossing film in Japan in 1989, the year of its release. Video sales to date have reached 50,000 in the United Kingdom and 30,000 in the United States. See also Tony Rayns, “Apocalypse Nous,” *Time Out*, Jan. 16, 1991, p. 16.

In fact, science fiction is a particularly appropriate vehicle for treating the complexities of the Japanese success story. The very vocabulary of the genre—that of technological, social, and cultural advancement—reflects the cultural instrumentalities that characterize modern capitalism. These instrumentalities include the rapidity of change, the ideology of progress toward some anticipated “future,” and the omnipresence of the machine.

All of these elements are treated in Japanese science fiction, usually in a way that emphasizes the darker side of modern Japanese society. While such popular culture staples as children’s comics and romance novels have often supported the stereotype of Japan as a secure, peacefully middle-class environment, Japanese science fiction, whether in prose, comic, or film form, has tended to revel in what Susan Sontag has called “the imagination of disaster.”<sup>4</sup> The works examined in this article—the *Godzilla* series, *Nippon chinbotsu* (1974; literally “Japan sinks,” but released in the United States as *Tidal Wave* in 1975), *Akira*, and related comics and prose—all center around a vision of disaster, of social, material, and sometimes spiritual collapse.

These works are not alone in their shared dystopian vision. Much of Japanese science fiction, from the turn of the century on, has had a distinctly and memorably bleak view of society, as is common with Western science fiction as well. Indeed, the twentieth century in general has long been considered the age of the anti-utopia.<sup>5</sup> This brings us to another intriguing aspect of science fiction, its ability to uniquely reflect and comment upon modern culture. Or, as Jameson puts it, science fiction serves to “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present* and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization.”<sup>6</sup>

That the Japanese “present” has often been a problematic one is clearly indicated in the development of science fiction in Japan.<sup>7</sup> Japanese science fiction parallels the modernization of Japan but celebrations of this modernization are notably lacking. After an initial spate of novels envisioning a techno-military utopia under the emperor, prewar science fiction limned

4. Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 451–65.

5. See Krishan Kumar’s chapter on “Utopia and Anti-Utopia in the Twentieth Century,” in his *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), pp. 380–424.

6. Fredric Jameson, “Progress Versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9 (1982), p. 152.

7. For a discussion of the development of science fiction in modern Japan, see Robert Matthew, *Japanese Science Fiction: A View of a Changing Society* (Oxford: The Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies Series, 1989). For an overview of postwar Japanese science fiction, see Elizabeth Anne Hull and Mark Siegel, “Science Fiction,” in Richard Gid Powers and Hidetoshi Kato, eds., *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 243–74.

a future where advanced technology and military success had only brought about wars, famines, and plagues, or else more sophisticated ways to oppress a passive, fearful citizenry. Much of postwar Japanese science fiction has continued this dystopian trend, often with apocalyptic touches, especially in the immensely popular writings of Komatsu Sakyō whose 1973 novel *Nippon chinbotsu* became the basis for the popular film of the same name, one of the major works considered in this article.

The notion of disaster is of course not the only theme in Japanese popular culture, or even in Japanese science fiction.<sup>8</sup> It is an important one, however, with profound implications for understanding the development of science fiction in Japan and also the changing Japanese notion of identity. For science fiction, in its insistent concern with difference (in terms of “alien” versus “normal, or “natural” versus “artificial”), is a genre fundamentally involved with the problem of identity.

This article will examine the development of the Japanese imagination of disaster both formally, in terms of its relationship with the science fiction genre as a whole, and also more generally in terms of its role within the context of postwar Japanese culture. By comparing *Akira* with the earlier *Nippon chinbotsu* and *Godzilla*, one can trace two major developments. The first is a pattern of change in terms of technique and narrative structure, from what might be called the traditional science fiction film with its convention of “secure horror” with definitive narrative closure in both the *Godzilla* films and *Nippon chinbotsu*, to what can well be called a postmodern privileging of narrative movement and lack of closure in *Akira*. The other pattern is what might be labeled an ideological change in terms of both the presentation of disaster and in the attitudes inscribed within the films toward disaster, from a negative portrayal of disaster in *Godzilla* and *Nippon chinbotsu*, toward a virtual celebration of it in *Akira*. This ideological development, I would suggest, encompasses a generational change and the very conception of Japan’s identity as a nation in a complex contemporary world.

This conception of identity is closely linked to the role history plays in contemporary Japanese culture. Intriguingly, history too has important links with the science fiction genre. In his essay “Nostalgia for the Present,” Jameson argues that the rise of science fiction “corresponds to the

8. It is possible to speculate that the very nature of the science fiction genre, one strongly concerned with larger-than-life special effects, leads to an aesthetic concentration on disaster. Certainly, science fiction films in the West as well contain their fair share of violence and chaos. At the same time, however, I would submit that Western science fiction is on the whole less nihilistic than its Japanese counterpart. In the 1970s, for example, the decade when *Nippon chinbotsu* became an enormous domestic hit, American studios were issuing such upbeat science fiction films as George Lucas’ *Star Wars* or Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

waning or blockage of . . . historicity . . . to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression.”<sup>9</sup> This proposition is particularly interesting in regard to Japan, where science fiction began to be imported and written only a few years after the Meiji Restoration, an event that in many ways turned into an attempt to destroy or at least rewrite history rather than to “restore” it.

Turning to contemporary Japan, the works examined in this article show a fascinating and problematic relationship with history, starting with *Godzilla*'s attempt to rewrite it, going on to *Nippon chinbotsu*'s attempt to enshrine it, and ending with *Akira*'s largely successful effort to erase it. In a sense, these films may be seen as occupying a continuum, both in Japan's imagination of destruction and ultimately in Japan's imagination of itself. This continuum spans over three decades, starting in the early 1950s which spawned both *Godzilla*'s nuclear anxiety and its easy moral certainties, through the 1970s ambivalence toward Japan's own success that characterizes *Nippon chinbotsu*, and ends with *Akira* in the late 1980s, a decade of tumultuous change, both in Japan's conception of itself and its relationship with the rest of the world.

#### *The Ideology of Secure Horror: Godzilla and Nippon chinbotsu*

To see the changes in this continuum more clearly, let us examine the films in more detail, starting chronologically with *Godzilla*. Perhaps even now the most famous of Japanese popular culture exports, the *Godzilla* series began in Japan in 1954. The original film quickly became an enormous hit in Japan and internationally, spawning direct progeny (the series of *Godzilla* movies that continue to this day) and various related monster films such as *Radon* (1956), *Mothra* (1961), and *Mothra vs. Godzilla* (1964). *Godzilla*'s narrative, the chronicle of a scaly prehistoric monster who is awakened by American nuclear testing and lays waste to Tokyo until finally destroyed, both established and exemplified certain fundamental conventions of the genre.

The most universal of these conventions is that of the dangers of science, a theme as old as *Frankenstein* and one that, as will be seen, carries on importantly in *Akira*. *Godzilla* gives this theme a nationalistic twist, however, in emphasizing that it is American science that brings forth the monster. Even more significantly, it is Japanese science, personified by the humane Japanese scientist whose suicide helps destroy *Godzilla*, that ultimately saves the world.

The film can thus be seen as operating on a number of ideological levels. First, it demonizes American nuclear science in an obvious refer-

9. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 284.

ence to the atomic tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>10</sup> Second, it allows for the traditional happy ending (another important convention in the traditional science fiction movie genre), by allowing “good” Japanese science to triumph against the evil monster. The film thus offered its immediate postwar Japanese audience an experience that was both cathartic and compensatory, allowing them to rewrite or at least to reimagine their tragic wartime experiences.

*Godzilla* tapped into more than just the Japanese nuclear allergy, however. American audiences enjoyed it as well, partly, no doubt, as a chance to work through their own nuclear-age anxiety at a level that was alien and sometimes amusing in imagery, but familiar in its narrative conventions. In this regard *Godzilla* clearly belongs to the genre of what Andrew Tudor labels “secure horror.” In this genre the collectivity is threatened, but only from outside, and is ultimately reestablished, usually through the combined efforts of scientists and the government. It is a fundamentally optimistic genre in which it is possible, as Tudor says, “to imagine successful human intervention.”<sup>11</sup>

Naturally, this intervention is not finally effective until the movie’s end, and therein lies the other charm of *Godzilla* and its descendants: the suspenseful pleasure of watching large blocks of Tokyo real estate being crunched underfoot. This kind of cathartic/empathetic vision of destruction, which Sontag describes as “the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess,”<sup>12</sup> is typical of all disaster films and is the most consistent common element to be found in the works examined in this article.

While destruction is a constant in these films, the objects of destruction vary in important ways, as is clear in the second film I would like to discuss, *Nippon chinbotsu*. Released in 1973, this four-hour evocation of the Japanese archipelago’s total submersion into the ocean was an immediate and enormous domestic hit. The film’s popularity is not surprising, since it was based on the famous science fiction writer Komatsu Sakyō’s best-seller of the same name. Interestingly, however, the movie, although released in the West, never reached any audience at all.<sup>13</sup> The reasons behind

10. The threat and the devastation of nuclear holocaust were of course treated in many “serious” films of the 1950s as well, such as Kurosawa’s *Ikimono no kiroku* (Record of a living being, 1955) about an elderly man’s obsession with the atom bomb.

11. Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), p. 214.

12. Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” p. 454.

13. Released in America in 1975 as *Tidal Wave* with additional U.S. footage added, the film almost immediately went into video release. One guide gives it half a star, calling it a “laughable Americanization of a big budget (and much superior) Japanese film.” Leonard Maltin, *Leonard Maltin’s Movie and Video Guide 1993* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 1276.

this disparity in popularity may well be related to two interlocking elements, the objects destroyed in the film and the attitude taken toward this destruction.

As the title suggests, *Nippon chinbotsu* is a movie whose narrative action is concerned solely with the destruction of Japan (due to a movement of the earth's plates in the seas underneath Japan, causing a violent series of earthquakes, volcanoes, and tidal waves). Furthermore, its predominant emotional tone is less one of excitement than of a sense of mourning for the loss of Japanese culture. As such, and despite the enjoyable, if unexceptional, special effects, the film inevitably had a limited appeal to non-Japanese audiences. From the point of view of this article, however, the film's very uniqueness of focus makes it a fascinating comparison with *Godzilla* and *Akira*.

Since the narrative of *Nippon chinbotsu* consists entirely in following the country's process of inexorable submersion, there is little of the suspense found in a typical disaster film where the outcome remains in doubt. What suspense there is comes not from wondering whether Japan can be saved, but whether most of its citizenry and a few remnants of its cultural artifacts can be rescued before the final disaster.

In this regard, the film narrative has a two-fold focus. It includes the images of wholesale destruction typical to this genre, from massed crowds scurrying away from tidal waves, to earthquakes shaking cities apart, to fiery volcanoes spewing lava. Related to these, it also includes the frenzied efforts of the government and the scientific and military establishment to save what they can. These institutions, incidentally, are presented wholly positively, another element traditional to films in the "secure horror" genre. Also typical of these films, the movie's main protagonists are scientists.

The emphasis, however, is less on the orgiastic joys of destruction and/or combat against that destruction, which movies in the *Godzilla* series highlight. Instead, both camera and narrative linger lovingly on the beauty and the grandeur of what is being destroyed. Not surprisingly, Mount Fuji is a prominent screen image.

In fact, some of the most powerful scenes in *Nippon chinbotsu* are those in which destruction is only imagined. In one scene, for example, the Australian prime minister is shown gazing greedily at an exquisite statue of Kannon. He comments, "I wish they'd send us more of these and fewer people!" This scene brings us to the ideological subtext of *Nippon chinbotsu*, one that shows some intriguing developments from the period in which *Godzilla* was made. In *Godzilla*'s version of secure horror, the forces of destruction come from outside and are vanquished. The collectivity is viewed as something positive, deserving of protection, but to some extent taken for granted. The film, and subsequent films in the series,



comment on Japan-American relations, but the real focus of the *Godzilla* series is the scaly monsters themselves and the exhilarating destruction they wreak, although only temporarily. The series' reassuring subtext remains the same throughout: even if famous monuments such as Tokyo Tower or the new Tokyo City Hall get trampled on, they can always be rebuilt.

In contrast, while *Nippon chinbotsu* remains within the genre of secure horror, since it privileges a secure and reassuring collectivity, the film's action and ending are downbeat, emphasizing loss over success. In one evocative scene, for example, a pilot is ordered to fly over the Kinki region and relay photographic documentation of the damage caused by the recent massive earthquake activity. The scientists back at headquarters wait expectantly for the transmission of the photos but all that is relayed to them is a single image of sinister whirling clouds above an empty blue ocean. Impatient, they order the pilot to hurry on to Osaka. "This is Osaka," comes the reply.

The scene is a quietly devastating one, conveying a sense of poignant and irrevocable loss. Other scenes are even more overt in underlining the emotional bond between Japan and her people. I use "her" deliberately here, for this Japan is overtly personified as a female in both book and film. Thus, in one memorable moment toward the film's end, one of the scientists refuses rescue, stating that he prefers to commit a "love suicide" (*shinjū*) with Japan. The novel goes even further, containing a speech in which the scientist compares his love for Japan with his love for a woman.

If Japan is a female, then in *Nippon chinbotsu* she has become a badly battered victim with no hope of recovery. This is in significant contrast to the *Godzilla* series, in which the destruction is both more impersonal and less catastrophic. Indeed, the enormity of the destruction in *Nippon chinbotsu* is initially a surprise. This is especially so when one considers the timing of the film's appearance, a period following over a decade of double-digit growth, when Japan's economic success was drawing admiration and envy. What had happened in the Japan of the early 1970s to make a film that is essentially an elegy to Japanese culture so popular?

To answer this, it is necessary to go back to the "present" of Japan in 1973 that the film so successfully defamiliarizes, and also to note the difference between generations in each film discussed here. The writer of *Nippon chinbotsu*, Komatsu Sakyō, was born in 1931 and is therefore a member of the generation of Japanese most traumatized by the war and the collapse that followed. Perhaps even more significant than the war, however, was the combination of this initial trauma with the years of economic success in the 1960s, a period also characterized by enormous social and generational conflicts. In a culture where ephemerality has traditionally been one of the fundamental notions of existence, it is possible that this

success may have struck many members of Komatsu's generation as very likely to be transient.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the loss of the war and the subsequent renewed onslaught of Americanization/modernization exposed the fragility of both the physical and cultural presence of Japan.

Against this background, the popularity of *Nippon chinbotsu* becomes more understandable. While "high culture" Japanese cinema such as the films of Ōshima and other so-called New Wave directors profiled rebellious youth and a chaotic contemporary society in a way that disturbed many viewers,<sup>15</sup> *Nippon chinbotsu* allowed its audience the melancholy pleasure of mourning the passing of traditional Japanese society. The film is essentially an elegy to a lost Japan.

In a sense slightly different from Jameson's use of the term, the film's Japan has become defamiliarized. It is literally a non-place, a place that exists only in the imagination and memory of its surviving people, now scattered throughout the world, and in its souvenirs, those cultural artifacts that have been commodified and dispersed among alien nations. Despite its vaguely near-future setting, *Nippon chinbotsu* actually looks backward at a collectivity and a past that it eulogizes, commodifies, and finally embalms.

*Nippon chinbotsu* is thus a freeze-frame of the Japanese citizenry in 1973 with their sense of an eroding identity and an ambivalent attitude toward power and success.<sup>16</sup> (Ironically, the "oil shock" which occurred soon after the novel was published seemed for a time a frightening confirmation of what might be called a cultural "fear of success.") As is obvious in the film, this 1973 identity combined insecurity about the state of society with pride in the traditional collectivity, a collectivity that seemed on the point of disintegrating.

Thus, the film ends with an image of disintegration on a massive scale:

14. Perhaps Mishima Yukio, a member of Komatsu's generation who committed suicide in 1970, may have best summed it up in the title for his final tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*. The "sea" that Mishima referred to is an arid space on the moon, symbolizing what Mishima saw as the sterility of modern Japanese culture.

15. For more on the New Wave and the historical events surrounding it, see David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

16. Obviously, not all Japanese felt such insecurities about their national identity, although the suicide of the writer Mishima Yukio three years earlier may also be seen, in some respects, as a lament for a lost Japan. Other Japanese were frankly repelled by what seemed to be sentiments that seemed to echo prewar nationalism that appeared in the book, although they are less obvious in the movie. In fact, Komatsu is hardly a nationalist in the sense that Mishima was. His attitude toward Japan is, however, decidedly "romantic" as Yamamoto Akira describes it (see Yamamoto Akira, "*Nippon chinbotsu* no imi," *Kokubungaku*, Vol. 20 [1975], pp. 191–96). This romanticism is an attitude clearly shared by a large number of the Japanese reading and viewing public of the period.

the single image of a high-altitude shot over the sea where Japan used to be, the names of its no-longer-existing cities superimposed on an empty ocean. All that remains of Japan is its history, encased in either written or collective memory.

If *Nippon chinbotsu* is an homage to history, *Akira*, our final film to consider, celebrates history's imminent demise. Far more sophisticated in its special effects and complex story line than either the *Godzilla* series or *Nippon chinbotsu*, *Akira* still shares with them a fascination with disaster. Indeed, *Akira* is perhaps the most vividly realized evocation of disaster to be produced in Japan thus far.

It is also an extraordinarily popular film. In the year of its release, it became the highest grossing movie in Japan, reaching an even wider audience than the original comic series had attained. Even more interestingly, it has met with a strong reception abroad among both critics and the public. With its narrative complexity, superb animation, and extraordinary technique, *Akira* is an important text, exemplifying certain aspects of popular culture in contemporary Japan that are well worth detailed examination.

*In the End is My Beginning: Akira's Celebration of the Alien*

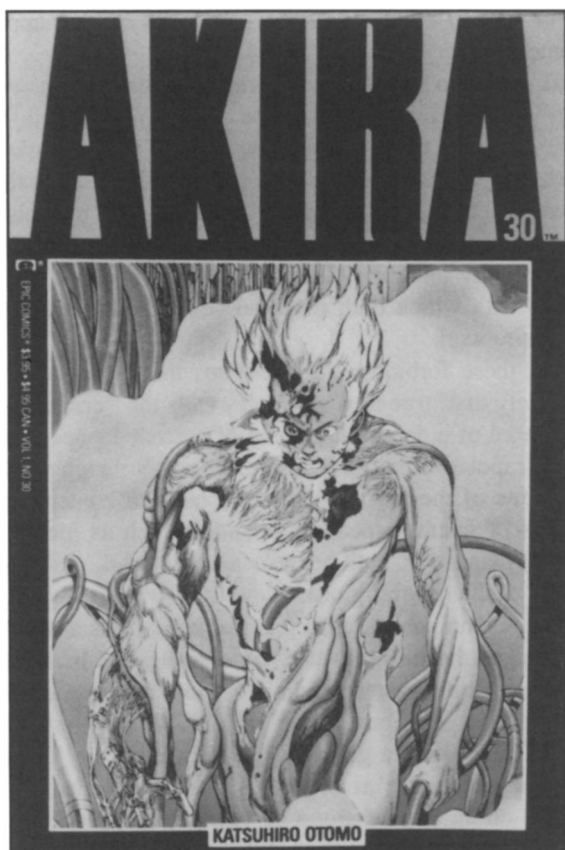
*Akira* begins with an ending. Taking full advantage of the special effects available in animated cinema, the film opens in an eerie silence as the camera travels up an empty city street. A one-line announcement appears on screen: "Tokyo, July 16, 1988." The next image is an overpowering white radiance followed by another brief announcement: "31 Years After WWII, AD 2019, Neo Tokyo."<sup>17</sup>

The film's action subsequently switches to "Neo Tokyo" to present a grim future world: "Old Tokyo" is now a vast, bombed-out crater while "Neo Tokyo" is a place of overwhelming aesthetic and social alienation, a decaying cityscape that is physically fragmenting. Its political center is only barely held together by corrupt politicians and enigmatic military figures. Throughout the film, society seems on the brink of destruction, threatened by a variety of forces including a delinquent underclass, a mysterious resistance movement, and a group of mutants possessing terrifying psychic powers.

The viewer's initial response to *Akira* is undoubtedly a visceral one. *Akira's* animation is cutting edge. Or, as Tony Rayns says of the film, "a large part of the attraction is the sheer quality and vigour of the animation itself."<sup>18</sup> Supervised with great care and expense by the comic's creator

17. In a bit of nihilistic humor, the day of the destruction of Tokyo in *Akira* was the same day as the film's premier in Japan! I am indebted to Tony Rayns (in conversation, London, August 1991) for pointing this out.

18. Rayns, "Apocalypse Nous," p. 16.



© Kodansha and Otomo Katsuhiro. Used with permission.

Otomo himself, *Akira* creates a future world as densely and grittily realized as the surreally bleak milieus of such Western live-action science fiction films as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), or *Alien* (1979). *Akira* also shares with these films a dark, hard-edged visual vocabulary, indicating its membership in what Constance Penley calls “tech noir,”<sup>19</sup> a paradoxical genre that excoriates technology at the same time that its sophisticated special effects are unconscious celebrations of technological achievement. The glossily dark surfaces of tech noir films both underline the overwhelming grimness of the visions presented as well as create a

19. Constance Penley, *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 122. Also see Tom Shone, “Safe SFX,” in *The Guardian Guide*, Aug. 3, 1991, pp. viii and ix.

visual style or "world" that is as important a part of their appeal as their narrative content.

The bleak grandeur of *Akira's* "world" is breathtaking. Its vision of "Neo Tokyo" combines an extrapolation of present-day Shinjuku's futuristic urban skyline with the overwhelming scale of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). "Neo Tokyo," in turn, is contrasted with glimpses of the immense and dark wasteland of the crater that was "Old Tokyo." It is this forbidding combination of dystopia and apocalypse, the inhuman immensity of the city with the equally inhuman catastrophe of the crater, that are the two central images with which both film and comic serial begin, and which underlie the entire work.

In between these forbidding images runs the gamut of life in "Neo Tokyo," a society that, true to what Penley calls the "critical dystopia,"<sup>20</sup> is clearly far more of a defamiliarization of present Japanese society than a sustained extrapolation into the future. Otomo's vision thus highlights and extends some of the most obvious problems of contemporary Japan: the aimlessness of youth, especially outsiders such as motor bikers; the repression of resistance in both schools and the work place; and the increasing power of the new religions.

Although this omnipresent dystopian background is a vital element in *Akira*, what makes the film unusually interesting and lifts it beyond the category of the typical disaster movie is the fascinating and complex narrative it foregrounds. As Tony Rayns says, "*Akira* is very probably the first animated feature with a genuinely novelistic density of incident and character."<sup>21</sup> To summarize as briefly as possible: Both film and comic focus primarily on an outlaw group of young bikers, led by two former orphan asylum inmates, Kaneda and Tetsuo, who become involved with both the resistance movement and a group of telekinetic mutants. Their involvement begins in an extraordinary early scene when Kaneda and Tetsuo, escaping a rival gang at the crater of "Old Tokyo," encounter a bizarre-looking creature with the body of a boy but the grotesquely wizened face of an old man.

The creature is, in fact, a boy, but one whose childhood was frozen in the 1980s as the result of a series of experiments that turned him into a telekinetic mutant, possessing great psychic powers but remaining mentally a child. The child is part of a group of mutants, the most powerful of whom is the mysterious Akira. It was experiments with Akira and the

20. Constance Penley, "Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia," in James Donald, ed., *Fantasy and Cinema* (London: The British Film Institute, 1989), p. 198.

21. Tony Rayns, "*Akira*," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. 58, No. 686 (March 1991), p. 66.