immensely powerful psychic energies released thereby that led to nuclear disaster in Tokyo and ultimately World War III, the viewer (or reader) learns.

Kaneda and Tetsuo are both drawn into the strange world of the mutants for ultimately antagonistic reasons: Kaneda, who is perhaps the closest thing to a conventional hero that the work possesses, becomes attached to Kei, a female resistance fighter attempting to rescue the mutants from the government, especially from the control of a man known only as the Colonel. Kaneda's interest in Kei is purely physical rather than political, and the reader/viewer never learns what the resistance specifically hopes to accomplish through revolution. Ultimately Kaneda and Kei go in search of Tetsuo who, they learn, has begun to develop bizarre powers of his own.

Tetsuo's initial encounter with the mutants has apparently stirred up his own incipient telekinetic powers, leading him to a series of strange and graphic metamorphoses as his new abilities begin to take control of him. His actions become increasingly destructive and increasingly uncontrollable, even though what appears to be the entire military-industrial complex of Japan is eventually called in to stop him. His former friend Kaneda is also worried about him, fearing his potential psychic powers. At the film's climax, Tetsuo and Kaneda finally meet again and engage in a spectacular duel on the site of the new Olympic stadium in Tokyo, a site that, ironically, exactly resembles the old Olympic stadium, destroyed in the 1988 blast. In this duel, Tetsuo mutates back and forth between human and inhuman in a series of what must be some of the most extraordinary special metamorphoses since the last few minutes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

As does the Kubrick film, *Akira* ends with a beginning. Tetsuo ultimately mutates into a new being, perhaps even a new universe. Neo Tokyo is largely destroyed by the powers unleashed by Tetsuo, although some survivors, including Kei and Kaneda, remain. The film ends with the new entity that is Tetsuo intoning the threatening words "I am Tetsuo."

Tetsuo is not the only threatening creature in *Akira,* however. The whole world of the film is a threatening one. From the corrupt politicians and the ominous Colonel, to the brutal teachers at the school the bikers occasionally attend, the film is notable for its lack of sympathetic characters. Unlike traditional disaster films both in Japan and the West, *Akira* offers no moral center or even a positive alternative. Science, seen as responsible for the mutants and for World War III, appears capable only of evil, while the resistance's opposition is totally uncharacterized. Even Kaneda, whose main virtue seems to lie in his bravery and deeply held gang loyalties, is only marginally more positive than anyone else.

Akira's nihilism has much in common with contemporary American

films that can be classified as part of the postmodern genre.[22] These films, which include the previously mentioned tech noir science fiction works or such surreal visions as David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990), have in common a fast-paced episodic narrative structure often organized around scenes of intense violence, a fascination with arresting imagery over character development, and an almost total lack of a moral center. Both narrative structure and content therefore seem to celebrate the "constancy of uncertainty"[23] that Tetsuo Najita suggests is central to the postmodern experience. Or as Arthur Kroker puts it, these films "are panic sites, just for the fun of it."[24]

Indeed, *Akira,* with its visceral excitement and frenzied pace *is* fun at the same time that it is provocative and perhaps disturbing. In some ways the film fits into what Andrew Tudor calls the genre of "paranoid horror," in which danger comes not from outside in the form of alien invaders (as in *Godzilla,* for example), but from one's friends, family, or even oneself. As Tudor describes it, "Gone is the sense of an established social and moral order which is both worth defending and capable of defence. Gone too is the assumption that there are legitimate authorities who can demand our cooperation in exchange for their protection."[25] *Akira*'s attitude toward the established order is an overtly negative one. Furthermore, the mutants and their problematic relationship with the government can be seen as exemplifying the alien within the heart of a collectivity that is itself monstrous, as is usually the case with the paranoid horror genre.

But the final impression the audience is likely to carry away from the film is less one of horror than of exhilaration. This sense of exhilaration has to do with the ambivalent attitude toward the monstrous and toward power in general embedded in *Akira*'s subtext. The film is both a subversion of traditional power and authority and a celebration of a new kind of power, one linked to the issue of identity, in the form of Tetsuo's astonishing metamorphoses.[26] Unlike the traditional fixed identities that the Col-

22. I would also like to point out that certain aspects of *Akira* resemble traditional Japanese culture. The constantly changing open-ended narrative, for example, may have roots in medieval *renga* poetry, a form of open-ended linked verse. Tetsuo's spectacular metamorphoses are not unlike some of the grotesque ghost prints of early nineteenth-century artists such as Kuniyoshi and Hokusai. This is not to subvert my identification of *Akira* as postmodern, however, for contemporary Japanese scholars see traditional Japanese culture as having "postmodern" aspects.

23. Tetsuo Najita, "Culture and Technology," in Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds., *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 19.

24. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 279.

25. Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists,* p. 22.

26. In a discussion of the animated television hero "Ultraman" in relation to the Japanese attitude toward power, Elizabeth Anne Hull and Mark Siegel suggest that in Japan

onel and the politicians embody, Tetsuo's mutations epitomize the "subject [that] has disintegrated into a flux of euphoric intensities, fragmented and disconnected,"[27] as Kellner summarizes the conventional view of postmodern identity.

Or, as Brent Easton Ellis says of pop singer Madonna's continuous image changes, her "talent lies in her willingness to transform herself and change images rapidly which seems to reflect [her] generation's conflicting interests and visions."[28] At the same time, as Kellner goes on to make clear, and as Madonna's appeal exemplifies, even this fluctuating identity is still an identity, an image to be admired, and perhaps imitated.

Tetsuo is unlikely to become the next Madonna, but it is interesting that the year after *Akira*'s release, a young filmmaker, Tsukamoto Shinya, created a critically acclaimed avant garde film called *Tetsuo* (1990), which he admitted was an explicit homage to *Akira*'s Tetsuo. Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo,* however, is even bleaker than *Akira.* Through an unforgettable series of grotesque, even hideous, visual images, it limns a world in which human beings turn into machines. These transformations are partly puns on the film's title, since "Tetsuo" can mean "iron man," but they also link back to Tetsuo's metamorphoses in *Akira.* What sort of character, then, is Tetsuo?

Certainly he is not a conventionally attractive hero. His sullen, angst-ridden personality is no doubt due to having been abandoned initially by his parents to the orphanage asylum and subsequently abandoned by society to the restless existence of the biker, but it is still hard to summon much sympathy for him. As an exemplification of an outcast, he seems to exist initially as a negativity, a more sinister version of his friend, the gang leader Kaneda. It is only through his mutations and his growing arrogation of telekinetic powers that Tetsuo becomes alive to the viewer but, even then, his transformed character evokes awe rather than sympathy.

I would suggest, therefore, that Tetsuo's attraction is due to the fascination and exhilaration of his not-quite-controllable powers and that this attraction is to some extent generationally based: the inarticulate Tetsuo is hardly a spokesman for a generation, but he is in some ways an image of

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"power should be respected, even if it is alien, and, if possible, coopted for the benefit of Japan." Elizabeth Anne Hull and Mark Siegel, "Science Fiction," in Powers and Kato, eds., *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture,* p. 261. While this assertion is perhaps a little broad, it certainly seems to apply to many of the films mentioned in this article.

27. Douglas Kellner, "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities," in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, eds., *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 144.

28. Brent Easton Ellis, "The Twentysomethings: Adrift in a Pop Landscape," *The New York Times,* Dec. 2, 1990, p. 37. Metamorphosis, not surprisingly, is also a key theme in most contemporary paranoid horror. (See Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists,* p. 214.)

and for the younger generation of Japanese. This twentysomething generation, as the Japanese media are happy to remind us, is very different from its conservative, corporate-culture parents—different enough to be given their own appellation, the so-called *shinjinrui,* or "new human beings." How many younger Japanese actually endorse all the values of the *shinjinrui* is of course open to question, but there is no argument at least that there is a strong contrast between a generation that still remembers the wartime and its hardship and a new generation that has been accustomed to a peaceful, successful Japan.

Akira's creator, Otomo, was born in 1955 and is thus no longer a member of the "twentysomething" generation, but the audience to which *Akira* speaks and that has made it such a consistent best-seller since the comic serial's inception in 1983 is very much part of the *shinjinrui,* and they are only now beginning to find their own identity and powers in contrast to the war-scarred generation before them. Of course, relatively few of the "twentysomething" generation Japanese subscribe to the kind of deviant behavior that Tetsuo and his friends engage in, but their often nihilistic attitude combined with an aggressive materialism stand in distinctive contrast to their parents' values. Furthermore, one generation below the twentysomethings, in high schools and junior high schools, antisocial trends such as bullying and delinquency have been rising. Despite these trends, however, Japanese society remains relatively safe and secure, which may make Tetsuo's monstrousness seem all the more appealing.[29]

Tetsuo's metamorphoses speak to the rise of a new generation that is only beginning to exercise its powers. Cutting back and forth between human and inhuman, simultaneously revelling in and rejecting his newfound potential, he is terrifying and yet pathetic, an adolescent unable to cope with the new powers suddenly thrust upon him. In fact, Tetsuo's mutations both encompass and go beyond the specific cultural aspects of the *shinjinrui,* becoming reminiscent of what Allucquere Roseanne Stone finds in contemporary American works related to "cyberspace," the nonphysical realm of the computer where the subject loses its corporeality entirely. Or as Stone puts it, "the discourse of virtual world viewers is rife with images of imaginal bodies, freed from the constraints that the flesh

29. My assertion as to the paradoxical appeal of Tetsuo and the other bikers is supported in Ikuya Sato's fascinating *Kamikaze Biker: Parody and Anomy in Affluent Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), a study of Japan's *bōsōzoku,* or "violent drivers," gangs of young men on motorcycles who congregate in Japan's urban centers in much the same way as do Tetsuo and Kaneda. Sato's study suggests that the average Japanese is fascinated by the *bōsōzoku,* not only because of their threat of incipient violence toward the social order but also because their behavior and attitudes can be seen as a kind of cathartic form of "play." In other words, the *bōsōzoku* and *Akira* can be seen as related postmodern elements in contemporary Japanese culture.

imposes."[30] The "virtual world viewers" Stone has in mind include George Lucas, the producer and director of *Stars Wars* (1977), and Douglas Trumbull, creator of special effects for *Blade Runner,* but her description could also be applied to Otomo Katsuhiro and his brilliant work in *Akira.*

The implicit connection with "cyberspace" is also interesting when one remembers that a large part of the audience for works dealing with cyberspace are adolescent males, as is a majority of the audience for science fiction. As Stone describes it, a fascination with "the experience of unlimited power" leads to the "engagement of the adolescent male within humans of both sexes."[31] Boundary-crossing, another aspect of cyberspace, and one that is well represented in Tetsuo's mutations, is another important concern of adolescence. Tetsuo's mutations can thus be seen as a metaphor for the universal changes undergone in adolescence.

The relationship with adolescence and the struggle for maturity is further underlined by the fact that Tetsuo's metamorphoses are connected to his telekinetic powers. Freud has pointed out in *Totem and Taboo* that a belief in what he calls "the omnipotence of thought"[32] is characteristic of the phallic or exploratory stage, as the infant begins to explore his own identity *vis-à-vis* the world. Tetsuo's quest can be seen in overtly phallic terms, in fact, for at the beginning of his transformation he loses an arm, a displaced signifier of the phallus. Telekinetically he grows a new "arm" and it is with this that his first mutations occur. The mutating arm, growing more grotesque with each mutation, becomes a symbol of Tetsuo's increasingly uncontrollable power.

Tetsuo's loss is interesting to compare with Luke Skywalker's loss of an arm in a fight with his father, Darth Vader, in the second film of the *Star Wars* trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), another science fiction cinematic exploration of adolescence. Like *Akira,* the *Star Wars* series also privileges telekinetic powers, an example of their shared grounding in adolescent fantasy. Or, as Rabkin puts it, "formula telepath stories deal with common Oedipal anxieties, validating the reader's sense of uniqueness and his desire to change the world."[33]

Of course, in the *Star Wars* series the initial sense of uniqueness is

30. Allucquere Roseanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures," in Michael Benedikt, ed., *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 113.

31. Ibid., p. 108.

32. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 85.

33. Eric Rabkin, "Cowboys and Telepaths/Formulas and Phenomena," in *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 92.

rapidly transformed into a sense of belonging. Luke's arm is promptly replaced by one that looks just the same, and he is warmly welcomed back into the collective fold, thus obviating any issues of difference before they can even arise. In Tetsuo's case, however, his mutated arm grows only bigger and more grotesque, seeming to take on a life of its own and leading him to ever increasing isolation, even from his oldest friend. This isolation is exemplified in his final declaration of separateness, "I am Tetsuo."

Tetsuo's anguished transformations and his sense of outsiderhood are typical manifestations of adolescent angst, but they are also interesting in their inherent critique of Japanese society. Although Japanese culture celebrates the collective, it has long held a place for the outsider, from the haiku poet or the masterless samurai, to the endlessly popular image of the troubled adolescent James Dean. But Tetsuo and his friends are not outsiders by choice. They are literally orphans, rejected by society from childhood on, their only experience of collective bonding being the gang loyalties of the motorcycle group. Most nihilistic of all, the collectivity that has rejected them, the fragmented, nightmare world of "Neo Tokyo," is itself utterly unappealing.

Akira's privileging of these desperate outcasts thus becomes an even sharper critique of the dystopian center. By contrast to the government and the educational system, the motorcycle gang and the ragtag resistance movement—perhaps even the grotesque little group of mutants—seem almost welcoming by comparison. The movie's highlighting of telekinetic mutants is particularly interesting in terms of a cultural critique.[34] Because the mutants were initially normal children and thus should have been members in good standing of the still-extant collectivity of 1988, their fate is even more tragic than that of Tetsuo and Kaneda. Frozen in childhood and taken care of by a government that is only interested in making use of their bizarre powers, they are both insider and outsider, exploited and feared. They are, after all, indirectly responsible for World War III, when modern Japanese society and its history up to 1988 were erased in the nuclear blast, as well as exemplifying this erasure by their own frozen, infantile development.

34. Interestingly, works concerning telekinesis and telepathy in general surged in popularity throughout the 1980s in Japan, from children's comics and stories such as *Mai, the Psychic Girl* to Tsutsui Yasutaka's satirical adult fantasy *Kazoku hakkei* (Eight views of families, translated into English as *What the Maid Saw*). American popular culture also includes its share of telekinetic film. Most notable of these have been the films *Carrie* and *The Shining,* both based on Stephen King novels. *Carrie,* in particular, is reminiscent of *Akira* in that it too may be seen as an adolescent revenge fantasy in which the heroine uses her telekinetic powers to "get back" at the world. Compared to Tetsuo, however, Carrie's revenge is relatively small-scale, being confined to her family and high school. Furthermore, and in common with the tradition in American horror films of ultimately reinforcing the values of the collectivity, Carrie's rampage is ultimately stopped. Although the film's last scene contains the suggestion of her return from the grave, this is revealed to be only a bad dream.

On a subliminal level, the mutants are perhaps more insidiously threatening than the forlorn gang of bikers could ever be. This is signified first in their grotesque appearance, a combination of childlike and elderly that is one of both film's and comic's most disturbing visual images, and second through the concrete threat of their frightening telekinetic powers. In fact, a scene involving a mutant attack on the still-human Tetsuo is perhaps the most terrifying of the entire film.

In this scene, Tetsuo, who is just beginning to sense his new powers, lies on a hospital bed surrounded by a variety of children's toys: a bear, a doll, and a truck. Gradually, a childish chanting sound becomes audible and the cozy-looking toys begin to assume gigantic proportions. The singing reaches a crescendo as the toys converge on Tetsuo in a savage and eerie attack, but he wards them off and flees down the corridor, only to keep encountering them, like ubiquitous ghosts.

The "toys" are actually representatives, both literally and figuratively, of the mutant children, but their manifest narrative function is less terrifying than their subliminal one. To any older viewer, the attack of the cute (*kawaii*) toys beloved of young Japanese even, in the case of girls, into adolescence and beyond, suggests a potential arrogation of power by "children," by a generation very different from the one currently in control.

Akira's insistence on the youth of both mutants and bikers is in interesting contrast to such American dystopian films as *Blade Runner* or *Alien* in which the psychological conflict occurs between adult outsiders and corporate insiders. Thus the "hero" of *Blade Runner* is a fortyish detective while the "hero" of *Alien* is a woman in her thirties. The emphasis on the protagonist's youth in *Akira* underlines, I believe, the specific Japanese generational tensions embodied in the film.[35]

This youthful emphasis is also intriguing in comparison with the upbeat *Star Wars* series. As previously mentioned, there too a youthful protagonist goes through an Oedipal struggle but, in the case of *Star Wars,* the older generation is by no means totally negative. Luke, in fact, is helped in his development by not one but two older mentor figures, both of whom are presented completely positively.

In significant contrast, *Akira* is notable for the brutality of its authority figures such as the Colonel, the teachers at the boys' school, or the scientists whose implied cruelty is shown in their willingness to experiment on

35. The only recent Western tech noir film that privileges youth of which I am aware is James Cameron's *Terminator II: Judgment Day.* Eerily, both *Akira* and *Terminator II* start with their youthful protagonists riding motorbikes and generally behaving in markedly antisocial behavior. In fascinating contrast, however, *Terminator II* shows certain adults, such as the Terminator and the boy protagonist's mother, in an overwhelmingly positive light. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the entire subtext of the film concerns the search for an (adequate) father figure and the recovery of a loving mother. In comparison, *Akira*'s nihilistic vision rejects both the memory and the hope of positive parental figures.

children. Tetsuo is not even allowed the Oedipal catharsis of fighting his father. As several scenes in the movie make clear, he has no positive memories of family life at all, nor are there any traditional families presented in the film.

The absent or inadequate father has been a theme in Japanese literature since the Meiji period.[36] It is also a vital theme in "high culture" Japanese films, such as Kurosawa's 1952 *Ikiru,* whose famous flashback sequence, Tadao Satō states, "underlines the sudden postwar collapse of paternal authority."[37] Even more obvious are the works of Ozu Yasujirō, the majority of whose films, as Richie comments, "are about the dissolution of the family."[38] Of course, it should be noted that in these earlier films, the point of view is usually that of the father, and the family structure is still taken as the given point of departure.

In the case of *Akira,* however, unlike their high-culture counterparts, Tetsuo and Kaneda do not even seem aware of a need for a father and a mother. They deny the past as having any importance, preferring instead to build their own pathetic collectivity in the present. Ultimately, Tetsuo rejects this collectivity as well, as he revels in his new powers and turns on his old friends. Furthermore, at the film's climax, Tetsuo becomes his own father and mother; he creates himself.[39]

In its thoroughgoing denial or even erasure of the past and of the established order of the collectivity, *Akira* is also a major change from the popular culture films previously discussed. If old Japan was a battered female victim in *Nippon chinbotsu,* in *Akira* the remnants of the collectivity exist mainly as a group of corrupt and brutal male authority figures, existing only to be resisted. The fully sexual or maternal female is notably absent in *Akira.* There is no leavening softness in the film, no glimpse of any superior alternative or comforting escape. Indeed, aside from the virtually sexless Kei, the only really important female presence in *Akira* is the menacing Lady Miyako who aligns with the male authority figure as another powerful and enigmatic leader, this time of a new religion. It is possible,

36. For a discussion of the absent father in postwar Japanese literature, see my *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Yenching Monograph Series, 1991), pp. 15–25 passim.

37. Tadao Sato, translated by Gregory Barrett, *Currents in Japanese Cinema* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1982), p. 117.

38. Donald Richie, *Ozu* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 5.

39. Tetsuo's self-generation after a series of metamorphoses is interesting to compare with the aforementioned Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey.* As in that film, Tetsuo achieves an awesome new identity after a series of startling metamorphoses but with the important difference that there are no all-powerful aliens behind the scenes to help him along. Once again, as with *Teminator,* the American film suggests a far greater willingness to trust in some ultimate authority figure, an intriguing difference, given the traditional Japanese respect for authority.

perhaps, to find a female presence in the womblike architecture of the underground beneath New Tokyo where much of the film's fighting and chase scenes occur, but this too is a menacing rather than comforting presence.[40]

Architecture also exemplifies the rejection of the past, most obviously in the final climactic battle between Kaneda and Tetsuo. Taking place over the new Olympic stadium, an exact replica of the one built for the 1964 Olympics, it becomes a clear reference to the generation before the *shinjinrui,* the generation that built the original Olympic stadium as a proud symbol of the new Japan. But, as Tetsuo rips the stadium apart, there is no sense of elegiac loss. Instead, the viewer responds with visceral excitement. This is indeed disaster "for the fun of it." For those viewers/readers who care about the past, however, this orgy of destruction can be highly disturbing.

It should be mentioned that *Akira* shares its vision of a bleakly dystopian future with a number of other popular texts. Although more conventionally upbeat science fiction narratives do exist, such as the popular *Gundam* series about space wars in the next century, other recent Japanese *manga* are notably dark. For example, Miyazaki Hayao's *Nausicaa* (*Kaze no tani no Naushika,* 1984), another well-received series, is set in a dystopian future world where earth's ecology has almost completely disintegrated, leaving the air virtually unbreathable and the land unworkable, except for a few scattered kingdoms left along the margins of the poisonous "Sea of Corruption." *Nausicaa,* does contain, however, a protagonist in the traditional heroic mode, a young girl, interestingly.[41] There is also at least a suggestion of a pastoral utopia in the peaceful kingdom she inhabits.

Totally bleak, without even the contrast of a peaceful kingdom that *Nausicaa* offers, is Tagami Yoshihisa's aptly named comic, *Grey* (*Gurei,* 1988). This is an exceptionally nihilistic work, set in a post-apocalypse dystopian world in which computers have decided to "help" humanity accomplish what appears to be its primary goal, its own destruction. The story's focus on menacing computers contains echoes of the American *Ter-*

40. The absence of females in *Akira* is echoed in another comic series, *Grey.* Although *Grey*'s narrative action is initially set off by the murder of Grey Death's girlfriend, there are virtually no female characters in the text itself. To some extent the absence of female characters is understandable in terms of the conventions of the action science fiction genre, but it is at least provocative that the computer with which Grey does battle is nicknamed "Big Mama." Incidentally, *Grey* also contains its share of evil, aged male authority figures in the form of the "directors" of the few remaining towns who are revealed to have been responsible for Big Mama's creation in the first place.

41. Even more interestingly, the 1980s science fiction and *manga* gave birth to a number of young female heroes such as "Mai, the Psychic Girl," or the space-adventuring "Dirty Pair." This trend may partly reflect an increased female readership, but it is also possible to see it as suggestive of a new sense of empowerment among young female readers.

minator movies, but the Japanese comic has no pretensions to *Terminator* (1984) and its sequel's (1991) cautiously upbeat ending. Instead, its eponymous protagonist (whose other name is Death) engages in continuous bloody battles against men and machines, only to find that his final hope, to disable the supercomputer known as Big Mama, is a futile one.

Nausicaa and *Grey* both resemble *Akira* in their mutual visions of a relentlessly grim, oppressively violent future, but they also differ from *Akira* in two important respects. The first is what might be called their ideological subtext. Although the futures they envision can be called nihilistic, both works clearly present these futures as warnings. In this regard they are closer to the traditional dystopian classics such as *1984* and *Brave New World* whose aim, like their utopian opposites, was partly didactic: to "teach" or at least warn their readers of the dangerous trends in contemporary society by presenting the development of these trends in a frightening but plausible future. The attitudes toward these grim futures are unambiguously negative in all these works. By contrast, although *Akira* certainly satirizes some of modern Japan's most egregiously ominous trends, its sheer visual excitement and lightning narrative pace tend to work against any overtly didactic message.

And yet, underneath its exhilarating postmodern surface, there may be a more subliminal "message" in *Akira*. This message relates not only to generations within Japan but to Japan's vision of itself *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world. As Douglas Kellner argues, "the images of popular culture are also saturated with ideology."[42] In the case of *Akira,* this ideology is intimately related to Japan's conception of its own identity. Not only the generations but the external circumstances of Japan and the world in general have changed radically since the 1973 of *Nippon chinbotsu*. It is in fact possible to extend our reading of *Akira* beyond its being a symbol of the new generation, to suggest that it expresses certain aspects of Japan as whole in the 1980s, a Japan whose new powers *vis-à-vis* a decaying outside world were beginning to forge a new identity for it.

In this reading, the issue of the outsider can now be seen in global terms. Najita has said that "Japan's history is suffused with the sense of the dominant Other and its own marginality,"[43] but in the 1980s the presence of a dominant Other became more ambiguous as Japan began increasingly to assert itself internationally. With this assertion came an upsurge in international hostility, and Japan began to feel itself increasingly alienated from the other great powers, especially its former protector, the

42. Kellner, "Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities," p. 157.

43. Tetsuo Najita, "Introduction," in Miyoshi and Harootunian, eds., *Postmodernism and Japan,* p. xi.

United States. In the eyes of many Japanese, the United States seemed to be showing a more unappreciative, even jealous, attitude toward Japan's new strength. There is perhaps a foretaste of this in the previously mentioned scene in *Nippon chinbotsu* when the Australian government officials look lasciviously at the statue of Kannon.

Nippon chinbotsu not only anticipates Japan's outsiderhood but privileges the country's uniqueness in its emphasis on the awesome energy that is bringing Japan to disaster. A certain melancholy pride reveals itself when the scientists speak about the immense energy going on beneath the surface of Japan, as if this unique power were somehow a positive cultural attribute. The power that wrecks Japan in the film is an almost monstrous one, one that is perhaps not so different from the energy released by Tetsuo's grotesque mutations. Like the submerging Japan, Tetsuo is uniquely powerful and ultimately alien, even monstrous. In connection with this, it is interesting to note that the Japanese have to some extent held a love-hate attitude toward monsters in the postwar period starting with Godzilla himself. Godzilla began as the ultimate alien who, as the series continued, became a friend to Japan, an insider, "one of us."

Japan's sense of its uniqueness/monsterhood was no doubt compounded by the favorite epithet turned toward it in the 1960s, that of "economic animal." The Japanese populace took this up almost obsessively. Even more significantly, the "animal" of the 1960s has turned into a "terminator" in the 1980s and 1990s. A recent article in *Newsweek,* for example, about resurgent Japanese competitiveness included a quotation describing the Japanese as the "economic terminators of America's imaginings." Although the article suggests that this description is inadequate, an accompanying photograph of two Japanese technicians holding a silicon wafer is captioned "Economic terminators of the future."[44]

If Japan's extraordinary successes have made it all the more monstrous to the outside world in the 1980s and 1990s, *Akira* suggests that this identity is carried now more with pride than shame. Just as Tetsuo no longer needs a father and mother, Japan no longer needs its American "parent." Thus, Tetsuo's no-holds-barred display of power is ultimately both frightening and exciting, suggesting a new Japan and a new world.

In the final analysis, however, it is likely that *Akira* will be remembered less for any implicit ideological message than for this sense of excitement that it evokes in its audience. In its refusal to offer obvious heroes, its absorption in dizzying narrative change and overwhelming visual imagery, *Akira* offered a new world to its viewers, one that marked a change in Japanese films and Western cinema as well. By comparison to *Akira*'s

44. Bill Powell, "Don't Write Off Japan," *Newsweek,* No. 919 (1992), p. 48.

open-ended nihilism, the relatively upbeat closures of such films as *Blade Runner* and *Terminator* seem almost old-fashioned.[45]

In conclusion, we might return to the image of the continuum of disaster, on which *Akira* is the final point. In generic terms, *Akira* is in many ways an enormous leap forward from the earlier, far more conventional, disaster movies, *Godzilla* and *Nippon chinbotsu*. *Godzilla* traced an arc of destruction that was both limited and finally contained by a secure collectivity. *Nippon chinbotsu* privileges what might be called elegiac destruction; the destruction of Japan it describes is total but the country survives in memory, cultural artifacts, and history. *Akira* simply privileges what David Harvey calls "creative destruction"[46] in general. The movie is a roller coaster ride of panic sites, which can be either exhilarating or disturbing but never reassuring.

Out of *Akira*'s orgy of destruction arises a new world, but this too is not reassuring. The film's postmodern refusal of traditional narrative closure, combined with the insistent absence of traditional Japanese culture, brings us back to one of the central questions of this article: the role of history in modern Japanese society. *Akira*'s narrative indicates that Japan has gone a long way in the almost four decades from the first *Godzilla* films, from victim of powerful outside forces, to becoming a powerful force in its own right. At the same time, the absence of any sort of past, be it architecturally or generationally, in the film, suggests that Japan has achieved this status through writing off its own history. The battered Tokyo that could still be repaired in *Godzilla* and became a positive collectively enshrined memory in *Nippon chinbotsu* has become an enormous empty crater in *Akira*.

This absence of history is a trend confined not only to popular culture. Modern Japanese literature also seems increasingly indifferent to history.[47] Its most obvious expression is perhaps Murakami Haruki's popular novel

45. In 1992 the so-called "director's cut" version of *Blade Runner* was released with its original ending restored. Although this ending is less naively optimistic than the previous version, it still leaves room for hope and sentimentality, in marked contrast to *Akira*'s ending.

46. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 309.

47. Perhaps the most explicit statement of this rejection of history in modern Japanese literature comes at the conclusion of Mishima Yukio's *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy. In the last pages of *The Decay of the Angel* (*Tenin gosui,* 1970), the protagonist enters a garden without memories to discover that his entire life, which coincides almost exactly with the span of Japanese history from the Meiji period to the 1970s, i.e., the period of Japan's modernization, has either been a dream or a lie. For a discussion of Murakami and Mishima in relation to history, see Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 234–35. One might mention that Japan's Ministry of Education has also occasionally "erased" certain historical incidents in its textbooks concerning Japan's actions during the Second World War.

Sekai no owari to hādo boirudo wandārando (Hard-boiled wonderland and the end of the world, 1985), whose protagonist chooses to abandon the real world for a dreamlike utopia, the chief element of which is the absence of "shadows" or memories.

In contrast, *Godzilla* and *Nippon chinbotsu* are haunted either overtly or implicitly by shadows of the Japanese past. The youthful protagonists of *Akira,* however, seem to have escaped the past entirely. Or have they? There may be a hint in their frantic motorcycle chases and endless mutations that they are still attempting to get away from history, or at least to transcend it.[48] Furthermore, the film's very first chase scene ends at the immense yawning crater of "Old Tokyo," a reminder, perhaps, that history is not always so easy to abandon.

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48. Although most of the Japanese criticisms of *Akira* that I have seen tend to emphasize its links with the future, one critic, Kamata Toji, has attempted to relate the mysterious character of Akira himself to Wakanomiya, the god of the Kasuga Shrine in Kyoto. (Komata Toji, "Nagare to chikara no hate ni," *Yurika,* Vol. 20, No. 10 [1988], pp. 54–67.) Lacking expertise on Japanese religion, I am unable to say how exact the parallels are, but it is possible to see in the comic strip, at least, certain links with Japan's religious past.