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Dystopia in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*

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Akira is the 1988 animated sci-fi/action film by Katsuhiro Otomo based on his 1982 manga with the same name. Dealing with the themes of government corruption, rebellion, destruction, and rebirth, the movie had large international success and remains popular to this day. This essay explores how *Akira* reflects its dystopian setting.

Akira takes place in 2019, still decades away from the time when it premiered, in a city called Neo-Tokyo which is the restored version of Tokyo after it was nearly wiped out by an explosion in 1988. The circumstances of this explosion are explored later, and it lays out the dystopian setting of the movie - while Neo-Tokyo is larger and more prosperous than Tokyo used to be, the gap between economic classes is greater than ever and the streets are overrun with crime and violence. This shows the viewer a glimpse of a “false utopia” – the large, prosperous, and futuristic city, while also showing the reality of things with a glimpse at protests, police brutality, and the military control present in this city. Displaying the world setting in this way matches the characteristics of dystopian fiction that Vars (2016) identifies which are: quickly establishing the reality, laying out the “false utopia”, the “event”, the totalitarian, the resistance, and the result.

The story centres around a group of teenagers – childhood friends who grew up together in a children’s home. They are the “disaffected youth” – the future of this dystopian world. Having grown up in this city, which is so corrupt it feels pointless to have any ambition, these teenagers spend their time together as a biker gang. Reflecting the violence of Neo-Tokyo, they are at war with other gangs. This is how “the event” of this story happens.

It starts with the gang engaging in yet another of their fights. Meanwhile, a student protest is happening throughout the city. Amidst the chaos, a man escorting a strange-looking child is shown fleeing from the police. It ends with the man being brutally murdered by the police and the child vanishing into thin air and winding up at the same place the biker gangs are at. Tetsuo Shima, best friend of Shotaro Kaneda who is the leader of the gang, almost collides with the child. The child, named Takashi, is protected by a mysterious telekinetic shield while Tetsuo gets seriously injured from the impact. A military convoy shows up, retrieves Takashi, and abducts the unconscious Tetsuo. The rest of the gang are temporarily arrested while their childhood friend is taken in by the army for secret experimentation – there are psychic powers within him. This sets off the main series of events.

As Tetsuo’s powers slowly awaken, he is discovered to have immense potential, like the one of Akira – another boy with psychic powers so intense they caused the explosion that wiped out the original Tokyo decades ago. This reveals “the totalitarian” of this story – the power-hungry government running the city. Their attempts at playing god and harnessing unimaginable psychokinetic power for their gain show the extent of human greed, more specifically greed for power. Amidst their power struggles, the rest of the city is in turmoil because of the government’s legislative decisions as seen by the frequent violent protests. Obsession with power and oppressive governments are widely used tropes in dystopian fiction because they push current societal issues to the extremes that way representing fears about the future (Stock, 2018).

Moving on, the movie shows a further glimpse into the dystopian city of Neo-Tokyo. Police brutality is shown with some of the many protests being violently suppressed with gunfire. Large gatherings of people are also regarded as illegal as shown when a group of people is dispersed, another manifestation of their totalitarian government. Additionally, the presence of a religious organisation that preaches about the coming of Akira is vaguely felt throughout the movie. While Akira’s existence and powers are a government secret, some leaks prompted the creation of this cult-like grouping. This is another characteristic of dystopian fiction as it tends to show the ideals of religious convictions in a distorted way (Scanlon, 2011).

While the main goal of Kaneda is to get Tetsuo back, he gets involved in a larger scheme relating to the secret experiments with telekinetic powers. He teams up with the resistance to infiltrate the facility Tetsuo is in. Meanwhile, Tetsuo's power is growing stronger, and he starts learning to use it. Provoked by the other psychic children in the facility, he gets in an altercation with the military and Kaneda who has successfully found him at that point, and escapes to contact Akira and learn to increase his already destructive power. It is the inevitable moment where the government loses control over an immense power again, paving way for devastation.

The culmination of these events is the coup d'état where the already influential army seizes direct control over Neo-Tokyo in a desperate attempt to stop Tetsuo, their secret experiment, from causing annihilation. All the existing liberties such as freedom of press are ended. Tetsuo is successful in finding Akira – separated into bits and pieces by scientists who were experimenting on him and preserved in a frozen state. In his anger at Akira's state Tetsuo loses control and his powers start to take a toll on his mortal body, and he morphs into a large mass of flesh and organs. Finally, the unavoidable happens and another explosion caused by psychokinetic powers wipes out Tokyo.

With such a tragic outcome taking many lives and wrecking another city the situation seems hopeless, however, Akira, Tetsuo, and the other psychic children are finally granted peace when they stay within the explosion and leave the world that has subjected them to these levels of suffering. This is a bittersweet fate as it is not disclosed what happens to them, the audience can only assume they have found resolution in another dimension (ees, 2018). Furthermore, all is not lost, there are hopes for a new beginning as the surviving Kaneda and friends ride away into what remains of the city. There are infinite possibilities for the future.

In conclusion, the movie no doubt references the nuclear tragedies of WWII ever-present in Japan's and the world's collective memory. However, it is not an art piece with unitary meaning (ees, 2018). It also does a fantastic job at emphasising real-life issues of corruption, brutality, and greed for power within governing bodies, while showing it with the bright colours prevalent in the futuristic and advanced city of Neo-Tokyo. Just as nowadays, technology has made life in it more comfortable but created new issues and the people of the world are growing more and more apathetic toward those in power (Anderson, 2018). All this societal commentary is saturated in a single vibrant concept, overwhelming the spectator with its intensity. Because of this, *Akira* is a movie that takes more than just one viewing to fully grasp and that is quite possibly the reason why the film retains its popularity to this day. The issues it raises are still pertinent and the question of whether this is a bleak look at the future remains.

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