



JAPAN 2021 AT THE BFI IMAX

Akira

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Akira is very probably the first animated feature with a genuinely novelistic density of incident and character. Its narrative speed and complexity are such that viewers who come to it without prior knowledge of the manga (comic-strip) version tend to find it almost overpowering. On the other hand, viewers who see it while engrossed in the original find it a sophisticated reinvention of its source. *Akira* the film uses the same characters and more or less the same incidents as *Akira* the graphic novel, but innumerable points of detail are changed and the film's patterns of parallel action are quite different in structure and pace from the original. The film virtually demands to be 'read' alongside the manga, and amounts to a kind of commentary on it.

Otomo's storyline is not particularly groundbreaking as science fiction. The film version sits comfortably between *Blade Runner* and *2001*: urban dystopia meets the next link in the evolutionary chain. At this level, Otomo's main achievement is probably the sheer credibility of his vision of futuretech, as seen in the fully thought-through designs of vehicles and laboratory equipment. Where the story possibly does go beyond such latterday staples of American SF as cyborgs and replicants is in its linkage of psychic powers with genetic mutation: the story's premise (concealed in the film until it approaches its climax) is that Akira's unprecedented psychic development produced molecular changes that touched off a massive, silent cataclysm.

New or not, this conceptual nicety yields some extremely arresting images in the film's closing scenes. The Tokyo independent filmmaker Shinya Tsukamoto has already picked up Otomo's concept in a series of resourceful movies about humans mutating into metallic grotesques; Tsukamoto's most ambitious film to date is called, logically enough, *Tetsuo*.

SF trappings aside, Otomo's story undergoes some fairly remarkable mutations of its own. It starts out embroiled in a feud between pill-popping delinquent bikers, broadens to take in terrorist guerrillas, demented scientists and a military coup, and winds up envisaging the birth of a new universe. This 'exploding' structure would seem unprecedented if it were not for King Hu's equally singular *A Touch of Zen*, which also expanded its frame of reference from the domestic to the political to the cosmic. The correspondence is no doubt purely coincidental, but Otomo echoes King Hu in using a simple psychological gestalt to keep his microcosmic bikers in balance with his macrocosmic rebirths.

Tetsuo's problem is that he has been bullied ever since he arrived in the orphanage where Kaneda became his 'elder brother' and protector, and the

film's sub-text is Tetsuo's gradual but decisive emergence from his place in Kaneda's shadow. The climactic scenes are interrupted by collective flashbacks to the childhoods of the central characters. First, to the orphanage where Kaneda and Tetsuo met; then, to the colonel's research centre, where Kiyoko, Masaru, Takashi and the perennially youthful Akira underwent their induced psychic growth. What makes these flashbacks so poignant and affecting is their origin in shared memories, which successfully implies the way that those doing the remembering are about to be subsumed into a new collective identity. But there is also a deep pathos in the way that Otomo draws and colours them, far removed from the high-tech cityscapes and hard-edged action of the rest of the film. They resemble nothing so much as frames from one of Hiroshi Shimizu's vintage movies about childhood (say, *The Introspection Tower*, 1941), which also dealt with questions like bullying and rebellion against authority.

Simply as animation, *Akira* is an undoubted tour de force. It preserves the extraordinarily detailed graphic style of Otomo's original-drawings and matches it with equally detailed multi-planed movement and a colour spectrum that prefers shades to bold primaries. The most spectacular set-piece is the psychic attack on Tetsuo by Kiyoko, Masaru and Takashi, a self-defeating stunt involving toys and other tokens of childhood, but comparable visual and aural dynamics can be found throughout, even in the simplest scenes of exposition. It helps no end that the animators worked to a pre-recorded dialogue track; this obviously guided the film's pacing, but it also gives the action far more dramatic immediacy than is usual in animated features.

Time and again, the film avoids aesthetically predictable decisions. The music, for example, is neither screaming electric guitar solos nor grandiose 'new age' noises but a surprisingly low-key, post-rock score in which wordless vocal sounds play a large part. The action does unfold in robustly physical terms, with a great deal of violence and a great many explosions, but the film's centre is still and quiet. Beyond all the terrestrial and cosmic cataclysms (Otomo, one guesses, subscribes to the 'big bang' theory of the origin of universes), *Akira* manages to express a particular kind of adolescent confusion and despair, locating it precisely between a disturbing vision of childhood and a sense that adult 'maturity' is a sham. Its sensibility is closer to Nicholas Ray than Ralph Bakshi, let alone the dozens of also-rans in the field of Japanese animation.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1991

AKIRA

Director: Katsuhiro Otomo
Production Company: Akira Committee
Executive Producer: Sawako Noma
Producers: Ryohei Suzuki, Shunzo Kato
Associate Producer: Yoshimasa Mizuo
Production Co-ordinator: Ken Tsunoda
Production Managers: Yoichi Ikeda, Takahisa Yokomizo
Production Assistant: Keiko Nobumoto
Screenplay: Katsuhiro Otomo, Izo Hashimoto
Based on the graphic novel by: Katsuhiro Otomo
Director of Photography: Katsuji Misawa
Animation Photography (Asahi Production): Atsushi Okui, Akio Saito, Kazuta Furubayashi, Shuichi Ito, Hideko Takahashi, Tetsu Keibu, Kazunobu Okeda, Yoichi Hasegawa, Yuki Asaine, Toshiyuki Umeda, Youji Toki, Hiroyuki Matsuzawa, Yukinori Sakai
Animation Photography (Toms Photo): Hajime Hasegawa, Kenichi Kobayashi, Takashi Nomura, Hiroshi Kanai, Moriyuki Terashita, Hitoshi Nishiyama, Hitoshi Shirao, Takahisa Ogawa, Hironori Yoshino, Kiyoshi Kobayashi, Atsushi Yoshino, Kazunari Ichinozuka, Mika Saki, Atsuko Ito, Kyoko Osaki, Rie Takeuchi, Koji Asai
Artist Special Effects: Takashi Maekawa
Background Special Effects: Noriko Takaya
High-Tech Lab Computer Graphics: Ryoichiro Debuchi, Yuriko Amemiya, Yukiko Furubayashi, Naoko Motoyoshi
Chief Animator: Takashi Nakamura
Directing Animators: Yoshio Takeuchi, Hiroaki Sato
Key Animators: Atsuko Fukushima, Toshiyuki Inoue, Tomihiko Okubo, Masuji Kigami, Yoshiyuki Okiura, Sadahiko Sakamaki, Satoshi Hirayama, Seiji Muta, Satoru Utsunomiya, Kazuyoshi Takeuchi, Toyoaki Emura, Masatomo Sudo, Shinichi Suzuki, Hitoshi Ueda, Kuni Tomita, Ayumi Tomobuki, Chiharu Sato, Yasuhiro Seo, Yoshinori Tokiya, Hideki Nimura, Hirotsugu Kawasaki, Osamu Nabeshima, Masaharu Tada, Koichi Hashimoto, Hidehiko Okano, Hiroyuki Horiuchi, Yasushi Nagaoka, Morifumi Naka, Shinya Ohira, Hiroyuki Kitakubo, Satoshi Urushibara, Hideko Yamauchi, Yasuomi Umetsu, Akinobu Takahashi, Shinichi Terasawa, Toshiaka Hontani, Tatsuo Ryuno, Shoichi Masuo, Shuichi Obara, Yoshinori Kaneda, Toshio Kawaguchi, Masaaki Endo, Kyoko Matsubara, Shinji Otsuka, Tatsuyuki Tanaka, Kazuyoshi Yaginuma, Jiro Kanai, Hiroyuki Takagi, Makiko Futaki, Shinji Hashimoto
Animators (Telecom Animation Film Co): Koichi Maruyama, Yoshinobu Michihata, Masanori Ono, Kenji Yazaki, Hiroaki Noguchi, Toshihiko Masuda, Yuichiro Yano, Yuko Kusumoto, Hiroyuki Aoyama, Seiichi Takiguchi, Hirokazu Suenaga, Toshiya Washida, Keiko Tomizawa
Colour Keys: Kimie Yamana, Michiko Ikeuchi, Setsuko Tanaka
Animation Checkers: Mitsunori Murata, Hisahiko Komiya, Hitomi Tateno

Layout Artists: Takashi Watabe, Kiyomi Tanaka
Background Artist (Studio Fuga): Tsutomu Uchida, Asako Kodaira, Satoshi Kuroda, Miyuki Kudo, Kenji Kamiyama, Katsufumi Hariu, Mariko Kobayashi, Noboru Tatsuike, Hajime Soga, Tatsuya Kushida, Sanae Ichioka, Toru Hishyama, Tokuhiko Hiraki, Masatoshi Kai
Background Artists (Studio Uni): Jiro Kawano, Kaori Yamasaki, Tatehiko Uchida, Akira Furuya, Akiyoshi Iijima, Takashi Nakamura
Background Artists (Baku Production): Mitsuhara Miyamae, Hirofumi Hagimiwa, Kazuhiro Sato, Osamu Honda, Tatsuo Imamura
Background Artists (Ishigaki Production): Yukihiro Shibuya, Mamoru Konno, Hiroyuki Mitsumoto, Kenichi Takahashi, Hiroyuki Ogura, Kazutoshi Shimizu, Kazuhiro Kinoshita, Yoji Nazaka, Yukiko Iijima, Eiko Sudo, Yoshie Kanajima, Kaoru Honma, Fukiko Hashizume
Background Artists (Kobayashi Production): Shinji Kimura, Nobuhiro Otsuka
Background Artist (Special Co-operator): Takumi Nagayasu
Editor: Takeshi Seyama
Art Design: Kazuo Ebisawa, Yuji Ikehata, Kouji Ohno
Art Director: Toshiharu Mizutani
Music: Shoji Yamashiro
Music Performed by: Geinoh Yamashiro Gumi
Music Director: Shoji Yamashiro
Music Editor: Haruhiko Ohno
Music Recording Directors: Keiji Muraki, Shiro Sasaki
Music Recording: Heizo Yoda, Hideo Takada, Keiichiro Yoshioka
Sound Architect: Keiji Urata
Director Sound Recording: Susumu Aketagawa
Producer Sound Recording: Tokuya Shimada
Production Manager Sound Recording: Kozo Ogata
Supervisor Sound Recording: Tetsuo Segawa
Sound Effects Supervisor: Shizuo Kurahashi
Foley: Kenji Shibasaki, Toyo Onkyo
Dolby Stereo Consultant: Mikio Mori

Voice Cast

Mitsuo Iwata, Nozomu Sasaki, Mami Koyama, Tetsusho Genda, Hiroshi Otake, Koichi Kitamura, Michihiro Ikemizu, Yuriko Fuchizaki, Masaaki Okura, Taro Arakawa, Takeshi Kusao, Kazumi Tanaka, Masayuki Kato, Yosuke Akimoto, Masato Hirano, Yukimasa Kishino, Kazuhiro Kando, Tatsuhiko Nakamura, Sachie Ito, Issei Futamata, Kozo Shioya, Michitaka Kobayashi, Hideyuki Umezu, Satoru Inagaki, Kayoko Fujii, Masami Toyoshima, Yuka Ohno, Taro Ishida, Mizuho Suzuki

Japan 1988
125 mins

JAPAN 2021 AT THE BFI IMAX

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no Samurai)
Thu 9 Dec 13:30
Akira
Thu 9 Dec 18:00
Battle Royale (Batoru rowaiaru)
Thu 9 Dec 20:45

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